Behavioral Science and Architecture: Strange Bedfellows or Natural Partners?

"It is a real statement of commitment on the part of the School of Environmental Design that a place on the faculty is filled with someone in my field," says Dr. Kathryn H. Anthony, associate professor of architecture.

Unusual as her field is — the relationship of physical environments (building, parks, landscapes etc. already in use) to human behavior — it makes a lot of sense. Instead of professionals evaluating what other professionals have designed, research in the field concentrates on the reactions of users.

"It's the everyday person who experiences the environment," Dr. Anthony says. "Once a building is constructed, we can assess how it is helping or hindering work or activities.

"If people who use an environment have a say in what they want, they will like it more," she continues. "The views of those who use a particular environment are more important than the clients, I think. And people often have strong opinions."

The primary function of classes in human environmental relations at Cal Poly is to train student-architects in research skills so that they know how to obtain the perspectives of users before construction. Architects can improve their designs from developing a greater sensitivity to human environmental behavior, Dr. Anthony believes.

"The field is as multidisciplinary as one can get. It involves psychology, environmental

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design, sociology, anthropology and geography," she says. "It is also antithetical to environmental design psychology for its own sake.

"We have a bias at Cal Poly toward applying information. So does my field." The results of research should be programmed into new construction, which then would be evaluated. Results from the evaluation would again be programmed into new construction, and so forth.

Last quarter, eight students enrolled in Dr. Anthony’s graduate class, “Behavior Factors in Architecture,” conducted a research project which began with a computer search for library materials related to their study.

So that more materials needed for such studies would be available on campus, the School of Environmental Design is now studying the possibilities of starting an Environmental Design Research Center. The materials in the collection ideally would be used by Los Angeles area architects as well as students. The proposed center should enrich its holdings significantly by including original research publications from studies by Cal Poly students and faculty. The publication resulting from Dr. Anthony’s fall class would certainly be a valuable addition to the center.

The fall research project, called Rosemead High School, Post-Occupancy Evaluation and Behavior-Based Program, began when the Department of Architecture was invited to undertake a campus beautification study of Rosemead High School, located in Rosemead, California near Pasadena. The class wrote in their nearly two-hundred page report:

The immediate goal of the project is to make design recommendations which the school can implement with relative ease and little expense. Its long-range goal is to try to restore the school’s image to its original grandeur.

Built in 1949 in the Streamline Moderne style, and designed by Los Angeles architect Henry Wright (who also designed the Cal Poly library), the school was widely acclaimed when it first opened. It soon became a showpiece for the Los Angeles area. In recent years, the campus has fallen into disrepair, although it is still generally in good condition.
In submitting the report to Dr. E. Terry Irvine, principal of Rosemead High School, Dr. Anthony wrote:

The process of preparing this report reflects a rather novel approach toward architectural practice and building modification. Rather than relying solely on our own professional intuition as to what we think would best beautify the Rosemead High School campus, we studied your school from several different viewpoints. As a result, we base this design evaluation and program not only on our own perspective and that of the school administration, but also on the opinions of faculty, staff and students.

The final report was submitted to Dr. Irvine and professors at Cal Poly by the students at the end of the ten-week quarter. At that time, students analyzed the conclusions, using slides to exemplify their views. During the discussion which followed, the report was critiqued by Cal Poly faculty and Marvin Malecha, dean of the School of Environmental Design.

"I'm amazed at the tremendous job you did," Dr. Irvine remarked to the students. "I get the feeling all of you have been on the high school campus for years."

When and if the district implements the suggestions in the report, the new environment should have a positive effect on the attitudes of high school students as they experience a renewed pride in their school.

What Cal Poly students learned about the relationship between behavioral science and architecture should contribute to their ability to design more meaningful environments.

Dr. Kathryn H. Anthony gained much of her experience directly from living in cities throughout the world. Her father, a professor of urban planning at Cal Poly, traveled with his family extensively, sometimes leaving his children for short periods with grandparents in Greece. When asked about cities she admires, Dr. Anthony first mentions San Francisco. Nearby at the University of California, Berkeley, she earned her degrees, first a bachelor of arts in psychology; then a Ph.D. in architecture. Her thesis was "Social and Behavioral Factors in Urban Design."