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CREATING THE PROFESSIONAL MYSTIQUE: MARKETING ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In response to Robert Sommer's recent piece, "Architecture, Psychology: The Passion Has Passed," this article analyzes specific problems which have plagued consultations between behavioral scientists and practicing architects, and suggests ways in which these difficulties can be resolved. Drawing upon the author's experience as an environmental design researcher employed full-time in planning and architectural offices, the article seeks to answer the following questions: Why don't more architects hire behavioral consultants? How can behavioral consultants increase their chances for success? How can architects use the skills of environmental psycholologists most effectively? Finally, it proposes some modifications to the educational training of environmental psychologists to help make them more marketable in the business world.

It is even more unusual to find an architectural firm that has hired a research specialist on a full-time basis (Sommer, 1980).

Because consulting is the more common means through which environmental psychology has been applied to professional practice, my discussion centers around specific problems which plague consultations between behavioral specialists and architects, and it suggests ways in which these difficulties can be resolved. (1) I will argue that rather than simply writing off the application of environmental psychology, we should be taking concrete steps to improve behavioral consultants' chances for success with architects. My position as an environmental psychologist who has worked full-time at architecture and planning offices offers me a unique vantage point from which to view the interaction between social scientists and designers in "the real world."

My own experience and those of my colleagues in environmental psychology have prompted me to examine these issues: Why don't architects hire behavioral consultants? How can behavioral science consultants increase their chances for success? How can the education of environmental design researchers be improved to help make them more marketable? How can architects use the skills of environmental psycholologists most effectively?

As Sommer (1980) points out, architects usually cite economics as their reason for not hiring behavioral specialists to help evaluate and program their work. Most principals of design firms lack fruitful experiences with behavioral consultants and as a result, they have a difficult time believing that research can actually prove cost-effective. They generally subscribe to the belief that if business is good, why rock the boat? If their designs are recognized by their professional
peers, why should they open themselves up to a field that might criticize their work? And even worse, why pay money for it?

However, it is too easy to pin the blame solely on a lack of funds, especially where a large firm with ample resources is concerned. The San Francisco-based architecture and planning firm, Kaplan McLaughlin Diaz, considers research—or "inquiry," as the firm prefers to call it—such a valuable component of its practice that it devotes one to two percent of its annual income to in-house research (McLaughlin, 1979). Furthermore, the architects consider this amount reasonable. As an example, I recently worked on a post-occupancy evaluation of an elderly housing project. The total cost of my research was under 200 person-hours, a small amount indeed for a large architectural office.

What seems to be the key problem, then, is not the architects' lack of resources but rather the fact that environmental psychologists who have tried to obtain work as consultants are usually not prepared for the business world. Their academic training has been deficient in a number of ways, the field has not yet established itself professionally, and recent graduates pay the price for this when they try to locate and maintain consulting work.

Social science specialists encounter great difficulty with these crucial phases of their professional consultations with architects: entering a designer's office, promoting their field, and convincing the firm's management to hire them (essential prerequisites for any research collaboration to take place); successfully translating an academic research process into business practice; and ultimately producing a report that conveys architecturally relevant information.

ENTERING THE JOB MARKET

Let us begin by considering the problems which confront behavioral consultants who are searching for work. Their first difficulty is simply a lack of demand. Environmental psychology is still uncharted territory, especially in the professional arena, and it has not yet gained enough credibility to be in demand by architects. At the present time, almost any enterprising soul can assume the title of a behavioral consultant. And just about any adventurous individual who has completed only one or two environment and behavior courses can masquerade as a qualified environmental psychologist.

On the other side of the coin, the naive architect has not had enough experience with this virgin field to be able to distinguish a person with minimal qualifications from one with more rigorous and extensive training. Furthermore, environmental psychologists have no professional licensure. They do not need to pass the type of examinations required for the American Institute of Architects or the American Society of Interior Designers, for example, because such tests do not exist. The professional organization of environmental psychologists which most closely resembles these groups is the Environmental Design Research Association, but affiliation with EDRA gives a potential employer no indication whatsoever of one's qualifications, as anyone can pay annual dues and is interested in the field can join. All this boils down to one of environmental psychology's most glaring deficiencies: it has no established standards of professional practice which can assure architects that they know what they are getting when they hire a behavioral consultant. We remain, in a sense, an unknown entity, a mystery, and a veritable risk for potential employers.

A related problem is that since environmental psychologists are so rare, they are not subject to the flurry of competition that typifies other consulting firms which also work with architects. Architects do employ a myriad of "non-behavioral" consultants to complete their work. Perhaps we can learn from their experiences. Specialists in acoustics, lighting, engineering, fire safety, solar energy, graphic design, landscape, and urban design are regularly sub-contracted by architects on a project-by-project basis. Additional consultants specializing in such areas as cost control and estimating, economics and social research, health planning, environmental impact planning, and hospitals also make up integral components of the architectural team.

Since these consultants are usually found in large numbers, they must compete keenly for projects. A significant part of their competition involves possessing the resources needed to help create a professional image, and to convince a prospective firm or client to hire them. With qualified staff and sophisticated office equipment at
their fingertips, experienced consultants can monitor both the promotion and production of their businesses more effectively than can the young, inexperienced, environmental psychologists.

Consulting firms generally have their own office with a receptionist to screen their calls and take messages. Depending on their size, consultants have a professional secretary or a secretarial pool to type up applications, proposals, and reports. A secretary or file clerk creates and maintains files which store information about the firm's projects. Additional staff members assist the principals with their work.

These firms usually own or rent reliable office equipment which aid them in producing their work. An IBM Correcting Selectric typewriter is standard bill of fare in most offices. In-house word processing systems, which greatly expedite the speed and accuracy of written material, are becoming more and more common. Most firms purchase their own copy machine, and they are stocked with generous supplies of high quality paper for texts, dividers, and covers of reports. Some own binding and blueprint machines, while others send out for copying, binding, blue-printing, photographic, and delivery services.

Furthermore, these consultants to architects also possess the appropriate professional "symbols": the business card in its various forms (from the simple, unadorned look to the more elaborate and catchy versions with flashy gold letters and sophisticated graphics), the office brochure, and the office stationery.

With all these accoutrements, consultants have the facilities and the staff to produce sharp-looking resumes, applications, and proposals tailor-made to meet the demands of each project they seek. With their professional experience behind them, they also have the advantage of referring potential clients to previous projects and citing trailing lists of former clients as references. Professional experience and references are enormously important credentials in the business world.

By comparison to others who consult with architects, environmental psychologists are at a distinct disadvantage. Being new to the professional world, they usually lack most of the resources of these more well-established consultants. When they present themselves to architects, behavioral scientists lack the same "professional mystique," often finding it difficult to convince architects that they are seriously looking for work! Their only credential is their university degree which, in the business world, doesn't mean all that much; potential employers generally place far more weight on professional experience and references than on academic background. Even with their theses or dissertations in hand, environmental psychologists cannot possibly impress architects at a job interview, as the reports of behavioral scientists fail to match the content, style, or format of professional presentations.

Furthermore, environmental psychologists generally do not know how to successfully promote themselves to architects. As a result, designers generally believe that the contribution of an environmental psychologist to their office would be too limited. But researchers can offer designers a myriad of much-needed resources which can enhance the quality of their practice. Unfortunately, these skills are too often unrecognized by architects, and even by the researchers themselves.

RE-EVALUATING THE RESEARCHERS' CONTRIBUTION

Environmental psychologists can offer a design firm their research skills, and a lot more. They should stress this when they seek employment (2). Behavioral consultants are adept at written and oral communication, and the alert architect stands to benefit from both these qualities in a variety of ways. One of the most valuable skills environmental psychologists can contribute to designers is their capacity to write. Architects often find it difficult to locate a handful of good writers among their staff; the behavioral specialist can fill this vacuum. The writing, editing, clarifying, amplifying, and revising skills involved in preparing a masters thesis—or better yet, a doctoral dissertation—can be used to prepare in-house architectural documents.

A researcher with teaching experience can prove an asset to an architecture firm, particularly when it needs to give oral presentations to clients, city agencies, or other audiences. A successful teacher has mastered the ability to organize and deliver a presentation, to ensure that the information is being effectively transmitted, and to develop strategies for
constructing and responding to questions (Napell, 1978). All these skills are especially applicable to client presenta-
tions.

In yet another capacity, the environmental psychologist can assist the architect by composing and editing promotional material such as applications, proposals, brochures, and pamphlets. For example, my work as an environmental design researcher involved producing an office newsletter. My tasks for the newsletter included reviewing in-house documents about all the firm's current projects, interviewing the project architects about their work, supervising the photography, collecting additional visual materials, writing and editing the articles, and collaborating with the graphic designers on layout.

Once designing projects have been secured, an in-house researcher can work with architects on feasibility studies, development plans, master plans, program documents, and even "mini-research projects." The information derived from these mini-reports can be incorporated into larger documents, speeches, and other oral presentations. Architects may need to understand the history of a project site and its surroundings in order to identify salient social issues which might influence their design. After defining these themes, architects may be interested to learn how other designers have treated these issues elsewhere.

For example, the architectural office which employed me needed some information about issues in low-rise elderly housing for a presentation to potential clients. Here are some of the questions we were examining: Who is the typical user? What architectural designs have been built? What comparisons can be drawn between projects with outdoor and indoor corridors? How about different building shapes? Is communal dining an option, and if so, how has this worked in other settings? What are the typical parking ratios? How have designs been modified to accommodate handicapped users? What type of units do users prefer: one bedrooms or studios? What size building is most economical to construct?

To prepare for this presentation, my tasks included a literature survey of these issues, as well as telephone interviews with developers, housing consultants, HUD officials, sponsors, and managers of similar projects in the Bay Area. Within only a few days, this mini-research effort was completed, presented in a brief summary to the firm's architectural team, and used in the client meeting.

What additional skills can environmental psychologists offer architects? An integral part of the researchers' training involves problem-solving, a process which closely parallels that of design: identifying, defining, and explaining concepts; anticipating problems; developing methodologies to measure key concepts; generating research instruments; conducting the analysis; interpreting the results; suggesting alternative solutions; summarizing and accurately reporting the study. In order to successfully solve problems, researchers have learned how to plan and organize information. They are able to establish effective priorities and set criteria or standards.

Researchers can also easily help architects gather and record information about different phases of design projects, whether it be program analysis, schematic design, design development, construction documents, bidding or negotiation, or even construction. Keeping track of architectural projects and their progress throughout the design cycle is not an easy task, especially in a large office where hundreds of projects may be ongoing concurrently. Storing information about each project and being able to retrieve it easily when needed are two essential ingredients of successful architectural practice; they can save a firm a great deal of staff time and money. Furthermore, with the increasing possibility of litigation, accurate documentation of every project is crucial.

Researchers can be particularly effective in a design firm by collecting selected periodicals, anthologies, and monographs on issues relevant to the office and its projects. These can be compiled as part of an in-house library and used as a data source for architects to keep abreast of the latest trends and developments in their profession. The materials can also be viewed as potential sources for publishing and promoting the firm's work. Another use of this literature is for future programming and evaluation research, should a firm choose to engage in it.

Finally, environmental psychologists' keen abilities to observe the environment and its users and to conduct interviews are
among their most valuable contributions to a design firm. Design work involves regular interaction among the office's architectural staff, and between the designers and their clients, developers, sponsors, potential users, and other groups. The training of behavioral scientists includes such valuable tools as structuring reliable probes, listening skillfully and accurately, understanding the strength of respondents' feelings, and transcribing and recording interviews. When designers team up with social scientists who have mastered these skills, the result should lead to a higher quality design and a more efficient design process.

TRANSLATING THE RESEARCH PROCESS INTO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Once behavioral scientists have established their credibility and convinced an architectural office to hire them, their next concern is to maintain that credibility. To this end, they need to formulate a budget which accurately projects the amount of time and money needed to complete their work. They must estimate how long it takes to create and maintain research files; to produce research instruments, whether they be observation forms, a list of interview questions, or questionnaire items; and to have them typed up and reproduced; perhaps to generate a form for recording the data. Once they have collected their data, environmental psychologists must project how long it takes to analyze and transcribe their data into meaningful results. If a computer is used, researchers must allow time to obtain a computer account from a nearby university or research institution, to select the appropriate computer program and learn how to use it, to transfer questionnaire results onto a data sheet, to punch computer cards, to run the program, to collect the output, and to produce a codebook to present the data in a concise, usable format (Babbie, 1973, 1975).

However, with only their academic training behind them, behavioral specialists are usually unable to develop accurate cost estimates. Their lack of experience in this realm makes their interaction with architects even less likely to bear fruit, as the ability to control costs and to stick to a budget are among the most important criteria upon which architects base their consultants' evaluations. The problem is compounded by the fact that architects are less apt to re-hire or recommend consultants whose expenses have significantly exceeded their original budget.

Once they have begun their research, behavioral consultants need to keep accurate records documenting the research process. Their notes should identify the key issues and themes investigated by their research, describe the criteria used to select particular research methods, and illustrate the development of research instruments by saving rough drafts of questionnaires, observation forms, and other data-collecting tools. They should also provide a written record describing the criteria used for sample selection. For example, did a liaison between the architect and the physical setting help select those interviewed? What was the exact role of this individual? Was he or she a building manager, a developer, or a sponsor? What is the name and telephone number of this person so that a future researcher might contact him or her if need be?

Just like the users who are the focus of their study, environmental psychology consultants should leave behind their own physical traces and archival records which describe the evolution of their research (Patterson, 1974; Hebb, 1966). For subsequent researchers, studying the process behind past research can be just as revealing as reading the final report. Maintaining a comprehensive account of various stages of research is also a good vehicle for making environmental psychologists more accountable to architects. This provides architects with a built-in check on their consultants' work, and it is a regular practice of most non-behavioral consultants.

GENERATING THE FINAL PRODUCT

As so many others have pleaded, the behavioral consultant's end product should present results which can be readily used in practice (Brill, 1974; Sommer, 1972, 1973). Their final report should be presented in a professional manner, carefully typed, well-organized, with great attention to detail and format. Their presentation should meet the standards of final reports submitted by other consultants.

But content is, naturally, more important than style. Environmental psychologists need to provide the architect with usable
facts and figures, and they must not be afraid to make conclusions. They should be able to answer architecturally relevant questions: Can the layout of these apartments be improved? How are the outdoor hallways used? What is the relationship of the hallways to the interior of the apartments? How are the balconies used? Is the location of overhead lighting fixtures well thought out? How do residents like the window coverings? Are residents satisfied with the placement of the kitchen window? Is the height of the kitchen counter comfortable to use? Is the arrangement of kitchen appliances convenient? Questions which may seem theoretically trivial to academics may be extremely meaningful to design practitioners.

Equally important is the need for environmental psychologists to communicate at least some of their findings through graphic representations—either in plan, elevation, or axonometric form via line drawings, sketches, or photographs—so that designers can refer to them quickly and easily. Several authors have blamed the gap between architects and social scientists on the different modes through which each profession communicates (Deasy, 1974; Saarinen, 1976). Architects are accustomed to graphic, visual modes of communication and consequently find it cumbersome, if not tedious, to plow through social scientists' lengthy written reports. As a case in point, after perusing volumes of literature on elderly housing, I was able to locate but a handful of studies containing graphic illustrations of residential prototypes.

Environmental psychology consultants also need to address specific design issues and avoid excessive detail when reporting their results. Their conclusions should be stated in a form like "The Dayroom seems to draw people because of its furniture, particularly the comfortable lounge chairs," rather than "55% of those observed on a Saturday afternoon sat in a lounge chair, 25% sat in the couch by the window, and 20% stood and stared aimlessly." Avoiding trivia and unnecessary detail is most difficult when reporting observational data, but it can be done. For example, Whyte's research on outdoor urban spaces relies primarily on observational methods, especially time-lapse photography. His book and film are not only fascinating to psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, but they are also quite relevant to designers because Whyte identified specific physical elements that help attract users (Whyte, 1980).

HOW THE CREDIBILITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGISTS CAN RISE: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

How can environmental psychologists better prepare themselves to be architectural consultants? In order to accomplish this, the nature of their academic training will have to change. Environmental psychology students in graduate programs generally enroll in required courses in their own specialty, whether it be post-occupancy evaluations or programming of health care facilities, mental health care institutions, residential environments, and so on. Doctoral candidates must usually complete one or two minors in a related, but outside discipline, such as geography or anthropology. Their education is loosely structured, without much emphasis on meeting deadlines, presenting professional looking reports, or asking architecturally relevant research questions. In fact, most academicians who supervise graduate research in environmental psychology shy away from pushing their proteges into applied research. More often than not, they encourage students to examine more abstruse or esoteric research issues like the perception of doorknobs.

Academics who teach environmental design research should make a clear distinction between the curricula of those students heading for academic positions and those entering the business world. Those students who intend to teach and obtain the Ph.D. could continue the type of doctoral curriculum currently offered by most graduate programs. However, faculty should modify the curriculum for masters students intending to consult by requiring business courses which will help prepare them for their entry into the world of practitioners. Doctoral students would also have much to learn by pursuing a few business courses. They would have a more accurate picture of "the real world," and they should in turn be able to advise their future students more knowledgeably.

Another way in which environmental psychologists could become better prepared for the business world is if EDRA were to compile a list of its members who have been consultants in the past, along with some indication of areas of expertise (3). Future consultants could then call on their experienced peers for advice. They could
also find out which design firms have been receptive to behavioral input, which federal funding sources have been available, and perhaps even be alerted to upcoming projects which might benefit from their research skills.

Prospective consultants need a strong background in marketing research, where they learn about which audiences to target and what means of publicity they have available: press releases, publications, professional journals, etc. They also need professional training in budgeting, so that they can learn to forecast expenses, time, and materials needed to complete their work. An accounting background, where prospective consultants find out how to keep track of what's already been spent, would also be extremely helpful.

Professors of environmental design research should also encourage professionally-oriented students to examine architecturally relevant questions, rather than focusing on purely academic issues. Architectural faculty should initiate an internship program allowing students to work at a consultant's office in a related design field such as color, urban design, or landscape in order to follow various phases of an architectural project. Students would earn little or no pay, but they would benefit from gaining badly-needed insight into professional practices. Any type of experience at a consultant's office—even secretarial or clerical work—would be an enormous help in preparing new graduates for consulting jobs of their own.

Finally, environmental psychologists starting out as consultants need to be willing to invest some of their own capital or to take out loans to outfit their offices. They need to be able to purchase at least the minimal office equipment, and to produce their own business cards, brochures, and stationery. Ideally, they should also hire a staff person, if only on a part-time basis, as an assistant. Naturally, this process involves a financial risk, but some of us must be willing to take it. For without these basic accoutrements, a behavioral consultant has a difficult time opening the architect's door, much less stepping inside.

Footnotes and References

Footnotes

1. The author expresses her thanks to Robert Sommer for his critical reading of this manuscript.


3. This list should also include practitioners with environmental design research experience but who do not belong to EDRA. Believe it or not, there are several of them and they too can be valuable resources!

References


