

Symbolism, Styles and Settings

The Built Environment and the Imperatives of Urbanized Capitalism

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Summary

This article attempts to draw together some of the ideas and empirical evidence relevant to an understanding of the social production of the built environment. It is stressed that the built environment is not only an expression of the economic and political power exerted at different times by various individuals, social groups and governments: it is also a means by which the prevailing system of power and socio-economic relationships are maintained. At the same time, it is acknowledged that important reciprocal relationships exist between the built environment, individuals and society. The article is divided into two main parts. Consideration is given first to the social context of the symbolic content of the built environment. This is followed by an examination of the role of architectural styles and urban environmental settings in the evolution of urbanized capitalism.

Résumé

Cet article s'interroge sur la production sociale de l'environnement construit. Il y est souligné que l'environnement construit n'est pas seulement l'expression du pouvoir économique et politique exercé à diverses époques tant par différents individus que par des groupes sociaux et des gouvernements: c'est aussi un moyen de maintenir le système du pouvoir et les relations socio-économiques dominants.

L'article se divise en deux parties. D'abord, le contexte social du contenu symbolique de l'environnement construit est pris en considération. Ensuite, les styles architecturaux et les contextes d'environnement urbain sont examinés dans l'évolution du capitalisme urbanisé.

1. Introduction

Compared with other fields, architectural theory is impoverished, with an overwhelming emphasis on micro-scale interactions between architecture and behavior and an equally overwhelming emphasis on the deterministic interpretation of man-environment relationships. With a

few important exceptions (see, for example, King, 1980; Millon and Nochlin, 1978), the built environment has automatically been assigned the role of an independent variable, 'explaining' everything from people's perceptual acuity to their social networks and propensity to indulge in deviant behavior (see, for example, Zeisel, 1975). Moreover, the dominant trend within the field of architecture and behavior has been a narrowing towards a positivistic approach based on the assumptions and methodologies of psychology. Some authors, however, have expressed concern over the limitations of such an approach in providing an adequate theoretical framework for the study of the built environment, emphasizing its inadequacy in dealing with the social production of the built environment and of its meaning, past and present (Dickens, 1980; Menzies, 1979); Lipman and Harris, 1980).

What is most often overlooked or discounted in studies of architecture and behavior is the relationship of both the built environment and people's behavior to the broader context of social and economic organization and, in particular, to the imperatives of urbanized capitalism which have shaped urban morphology and urban ways of life for more than 150 years. By focusing on individual behavior and taking the built environment as a product of "design", man-environment studies have become myopic, under-rating the dynamics of major social and economic forces and overplaying the roles of builders, architects and planners. This clearly goes down well with the design professions themselves, but the net result is that the theoretical base of man-environment studies remains weakly developed and poorly integrated with urban social theory: a situation which has led several writers to urge the pursuit of a new sociology of the built environment in which the environment is regarded as a reflection of the dominant pattern of economic, social and political relationships within society and as a means through which these relationships are reproduced and sustained (Appleton, 1979; Dickens, 1980, 1981; King, 1980; Korllos, 1980). As Darke and Darke (1981) have pointed out, such an approach need not throw the baby out with the bathwater: the built environment does inhibit, facilitate, precipitate and modify both individual and group behavior, and the empirical studies of environmental psychology are valuable in documenting these processes (Groat, 1981). What is needed is an approach which encompasses the reciprocal and recursive relationships between individuals, the built environment, and society at large. This paper represents an attempt to draw together some of the ideas and empirical evidence relevant to such an approach.

1.1. The social production of the built environment

The idea of the built environment as a product of social structure and political ideology is by no means new. Indeed, variants of the basic argument can be found in most social science disciplines, even though they are rarely part of the dominant paradigm. Perhaps the most widely-known example from the field of urban design is the work of Lewis Mumford,

whose fundamental argument was that "in the state of building at any period one may discover, in legible script, the complicated processes and changes that are taking place within civilization itself" (1938, 403). From a sociological perspective, Ruth Glass has described the city in terms of "a mirror ... of history, class structure and culture" (1968, 48) and, more recently, Ray Pahl has approached the built environment as "the result of conflicts in the past between those with different degrees of power. ... As the balance of power changes and ideologies rise and fall, so the built environment is affected" (1975, 151). Similar positions have been adopted in political science by Cox (1973) and Lasswell (1979); while cultural anthropologists such as Amos Rapoport (1977) have detailed the way in which social organization is expressed in spatial form; and art historian Robert Hughes has discussed the built environment in terms of its role as "the carapace of political fantasy, the exoskeleton of economic dreams" (1980, 495).

In the past few years this basic perspective has been extended to incorporate the idea of the built environment as a means by which these social divisions, ideological forces and political fantasies are sustained, reproduced and modified. The major impetus here has come from David Harvey (1973, 1978), a geographer, and from the neo-Marxist school of urban sociology which includes Castells (1977, 1978), Preteceille (1973), and Lojkin (1976). Most of this work, however, explicitly rejects the relevance of individual behavior and human personality, thus denying any significant reciprocal or recursive relationships between individuals, the built environment and society. Furthermore, the emphasis has been on the macro-level relationships between social and spatial structure, with relatively little consideration being given to architecture, building styles or the role of the design professions in relation to the maintenance of the dominant social formation. Any new sociology of the built environment must not only fill this gap but also resolve the issues relating to the nature and outcome of the relationships between society, environment and human personality. Before suggesting how this may be done, it is first necessary to consider in some detail the social meaning of the built environment and the social context in which the design professions operate.

2. The social meaning of the built environment

One of the most striking and well-documented relationships between society and environment is the *symbolic* role of buildings. It must be acknowledged at the outset, of course, that much of the built environment is primarily functional rather than symbolic. Nevertheless, as Eco (1980, 12) points out, "every usage is converted into a sign of itself", so that most structures have a "secondary function" which is connotative or, in other words, symbolic of something. Because the symbolism of the built environment is a secondary and, often, unconscious function, however, it does not lend itself easily to anything beyond high-level generalizations.

Perhaps the most overt and straightforward kind of symbolism is

that which involves the communication of power. In this context, many of the clearest examples are associated with despotic power, where secular princes and kings have built in the Grand Manner with the express purpose of self-glorification and the intimidation of others (Lavedan, 1941; Mumford, 1961, 344-409). With the rise of capitalism and the advent of the nation state, the symbolism of public and ceremonial architecture became more varied. The purpose of the symbolism, nevertheless, was the same: to legitimize a particular ideology or power system by providing a physical focus to which sentiments could be attached. One way in which public architecture was deliberately used in promoting the new ideology of an industrializing nation state has been detailed by Schroeter (1978), using the example of the Palazzo delle Finanze in Rome. Although unexceptional in terms of "high" architecture, this building for the Ministry of Finance in the fledgling Italian state of the 1880s was of prime significance in expressing the rejection of the intellectual leadership of the church in favor of a new age of technology and efficiency. By commissioning a building with a "minimum of embellishment" and locating it in an undeveloped tract well away from the historic core and the Vatican City, the new government hoped to signal its commitment to a clean break with tradition and a fresh start based on the rationalism of industrial capitalism.

More recently, the nationalistic ideologies fostered by the Fascist regimes in Italy and Germany during the 1930's have produced more forthright symbols of power and destiny. Among the better-known examples is Mussolini's attempt to create "La Terza Roma" in a style which Hughes (1980, 427) has described as having "a jackboot in either camp: one in the vision of Ancient Rome and the other in the vision of a technocratic future." Even more symbolic of power and ruthless strength is the ceremonial architecture of the Third Reich: the House of German Art in Munich and the Zeppelin Field and Congress Hall in Nuremberg, for example (Gloag, 1979). In addition to these centrepieces, however, both regimes deliberately imprinted their ideology throughout the fabric of the urban system. Mussolini, enraptured by modernism, technology and the cult of masculinity (Hughes, 1980, 427), adopted Marinetti's Futurism as the official style for Fascism: not only for major projects such as New Towns (Millon, 1978), but also for hundreds of smaller structures. In Germany, where party ideologists condemned the Modern Movement as alien and culturally degenerate, the most striking legacy of Fascist ideology is to be found in the domestic architecture of the period: variants of the Hansel and Gretel cottage and of Tyrolean, *Heimatstil* and *Fachwerk* designs which were intended to reinforce the idea of a distinctive German culture rooted in the virtues of rural peasantry (Mullin, 1981).

These are somewhat larger-than-life examples. More important — though more elusive and less well-documented — is the 'meaning' of the various architectural ecologies comprising the modern city. In contemporary Western democracies, power is not only fragmented but also ebbs and flows between different factions of capital (commercial, industrial, international, small businesses, etc.), the central government, local govern-

ment, and coalitions of special interest groups. It follows that the symbolic content of the built environment will be multi-layered and, often, ambiguous. There are, however, certain themes which are common to the built environment of most cities. The ideology of civics and the power of local government, for example, is frequently symbolized not only in civic architecture itself, but also in a variety of political virility symbols (high-rise housing projects, redevelopment schemes, urban freeways) intended to impress other cities as well as themselves and their electorate. Glasgow city council's insistence on acquiring an expensive and unnecessary motorway system and on building the tallest block of apartments in Europe — the Red Road project — provides an excellent case in point. Almost every city also has an accumulation of architecture — domestic and commercial — which symbolizes the achievement and wealth of successive generations of confident and privileged merchants and industrialists. The Cross Street area of central Manchester, for example, is still dominated by the imposing gothic architecture commissioned by the city's Victorian elite who, preoccupied with the accumulation and display of wealth and with rather unsubtle attitudes towards aesthetics, left a clear impression of their values on the central area of the city (Kennedy, 1970).

As the petite bourgeoisie of small-scale merchant and industrial capital has lost ground to corporate and international capital, so the symbolization of achievement and prosperity has become dominated by corporate structures. Overreaching office blocks such as the Prudential Building in Boston, the Pirelli Building in Paris and the AIU Citadel in Columbus, Ohio (adorned with statues and lanterns and containing within it a copy of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles and the Bridge of Sighs in Venice) are clearly intended as statements of corporate power and achievement, notwithstanding any administrative or speculative functions. At a more general level, of course, the whole complex of offices and stores in entire downtown areas can be interpreted as symbolic of the power of the "central business district elite" in relation to the rest of the city (Cox, 1973). Meanwhile, other institutions have added their particular statements to the palimpsest of the urban fabric. The sponsors of universities, trade union headquarters, cultural centers and the like, unable (or unwilling) to make use of the rude message of high-rise building, have generally fallen back on the combination of neo-classicism and modernism favoured by Mussolini: a style which has become, "as if by osmosis", the reigning international style for any building aspiring to carry authority through an image of high-mindedness rather than raw power (Hughes, 1980).

The corollary of all this symbolization of power and influence, of course, is the way in which the great bulk of the urban fabric symbolizes the impotence of the majority of its inhabitants. Although there are some exceptions (such as the public housing projects in the Spaarndammerbuurt district of Amsterdam that have become monuments to the birth of municipal socialism; and the derelict land in Berkeley, California, that became People's Park, a symbol of victory by the local community over the centralized and impersonal power of a university bureaucracy), the

built environment belonging to most of the lower-middle and working classes comprises a bland, anaesthetic lifeworld which communicates a great deal about their status. Nevertheless, the intra-class subdivisions springing from the finely-tuned division of labor in modern cities require visual differentiation – in architectural styles and embellishments as well as in clothes and personal artifacts – in order that the “respectable poor” can distinguish themselves (and be distinguished) from the “roughs”, the artisan from the laborer.

2.1. *Social context and symbolic meaning*

There is no need to extend the list of examples still further. It should be clear by now that the built environment is heavily endowed with social meaning. It should also be clear that this meaning is rarely simple, straightforward, or unidimensional. To begin with, there is an important distinction between the *intended* meaning of specific groups or individuals and the *perceived* meaning of the built environment as seen by others. While this categorization is by no means mutually exclusive, the distinction is essential to a proper understanding of the social meaning of the built environment. Harvey’s detailed study of the Sacré-Cœur in Paris, for example, demonstrates how the intended symbolism of the building – a reaffirmation of monarchism in the wake of the Paris Commune – “was for many years seen as a provocation to civil war” (1979, 362), and is still interpreted by the predominately republican population of Paris as a provocative rather than a unifying symbol. At a more general level, Lasswell (1979, 57) has claimed that while the “architecture of opulence” – sleek office buildings and imposing private residences – “operates on a worldwide scale to reassure the rich, strong and self-confident”, it also serves “to provoke and radicalize the poor and the weak”. Another possibility, of course, is that it reinforces feelings of deference among certain sections of the poor and the weak. The point is that much of the social meaning of the built environment depends on the *audience*. In turn, the concepts of audience held by the producers and managers of the built environment will help to determine the kinds of messages which are sent (Appleyard, 1979).

Another important point is that the social meaning of the built environment is *not static*. The meanings associated with particular symbols and symbolic environments tend to be modified as social values change in response to changing patterns of socio-economic organization and changing life-styles. At the same time, successful symbols and motifs from earlier periods are often borrowed in order to legitimize a new social order, as in Mussolini’s co-opting of the symbols of Augustan Rome for the purposes of legitimizing the activities of urban reorganization under Fascism (Kostof, 1978); and (ironically) in the adoption of a selection of motifs from the classical revival in Europe by Jefferson and the founding fathers responsible for commissioning the public and ceremonial architecture of Washington, DC.

It is also clear that the *style* of symbolization can vary according to

the intentions of the “producers” of the built environment and the social context of the building. The “signature of power”, according to Lasswell (1979), is manifest in two ways: (i) through a “strategy of awe”, intimidating the audience with majestic displays of power, and (ii) through a “strategy of admiration” aimed at diverting the audience with spectacular and histrionic projects. It should be recognized, however, that not everyone wishes to display power. The symbolism of the built environment may, therefore, involve “modest” or “low-profile” architecture; or carry deliberately misleading messages for the purpose of maintaining social harmony (Hill, 1980). Neither is power the only *message* to convey. As we have seen, various elements of counter-ideology generate their own symbolic structures and environments. In addition, there is a whole spectrum of distinctive urban life-styles which have generated a rich variety of architectural expression (see, for example, Raban, 1974). Similarly, there is a variety of messages which stem from the *self* rather than group identity. The commonest are simple “I-am-here” messages; and these, in turn, are most frequent among the socially mobile, the *nouveaux riches*, new migrants, and transients (Duncan and Duncan, 1976; Goffman, 1969).

2.2. Symbolism and social theory

How can all these observations be accommodated within a coherent framework of analysis? Let us consider first the various attempts to develop a systematic approach to the symbolic meaning of the built environment. Gutman (1972) observes that the literature on architectural symbolism conventionally distinguishes three levels of symbolic meaning: “*syntactical* meaning, or the meaning that an element of form or style acquires by virtue of its location in a chain of form or style elements; *semantic* meaning, or the meaning it acquires because of the norm, idea or attitude that it represents or designates; and *pragmatic* meaning, or the meaning that is understood in relation to the architect, client or social group that invents or interprets the building’s form or style” (p. 299, emphasis added). The first of these has involved a highly abstract approach in an attempt to develop a general theory of symbols and signs: semiology. Working on the assumption that there exist innate conventions through which human artifacts convey meaning, writers such as Broadbent (1980), Eco (1980), and Krampen (1979) have attempted to explore the “deep structures” of architecture and urban form. Much of this work, however, is highly codified and mechanistic, deliberately and systematically abstracting symbols from their historical and social context. Jenks (a putative practitioner of the approach) concedes that semiologists too often “find similar divisions wherever they look — signifiers/signifieds, metaphor/metonymy — and, invariably finding them in pairs, they ultimately get even with the ever present richness of meaning in the universe by making it quite unpalatable and boring” (1980, 7). In other words, semiology has become progressively more pedantic and shallow, a theoretical cul-de-sac. More important, it has sustained what Dickens (1980)

calls the "fetishism" of design, focusing attention on buildings and architects rather than on the sets of social relations which surround the production and meaning of buildings.

There have, however, been some tentative attempts to link the "syntax" of the built environment to the wider context, moving away from semiology towards an iconology or, in Gutman's terms, towards the study of syntactical and semantic meaning. In his more recent work, for example, Barthes (1972) has sought to expose how signs reinforce and "render natural" dominant values and ideology, whilst Hillier *et al.* (1976, 1981) are attempting to develop a theory relating spatial syntax and architectural form to "social syntax" – the "patterns of encounters and relationships that hold among the members of a society" (1976, 179).

Despite their concern with the built environment as a medium of communication, however, none of these approaches directly confronts the fundamental questions of communication *by whom*, to *what audience*, to *what purpose* and to *what effect*? These are the questions which have prompted a number of writers to build on Marxian social theory in such a way as to accommodate the social production of the built environment. According to this perspective, the built environment, as part of the socio-economic superstructure stemming from the dominant mode of production, reflects the *zeitgeist* of the prevailing system; it also serves, like other components of the superstructure, as one of the means through which the necessary conditions for the continuation of the system are reproduced. One of the first people to sketch out these relationships between social process and urban form was Harvey (1973, 1978), who has emphasized the danger of thinking in terms of simple causal relationships, stressing the need for a flexible approach which allows urbanism to exhibit a variety of forms within any dominant mode of production, while similar forms may exist as products of different modes of production.

Within the broad framework sketched by Harvey and developed by the likes of Gordon (1977), Harloe (1977) and Castells (1977), others have begun to contribute detailed case studies of the form, interior layout and exterior design of various components of the built environment as a response to the reorganization of society under capitalism. The British prison system, for example, has received a good deal of attention because of the clear relationship it exhibits between ideology, social organization and architectural form (Foucault, 1977; Ignatieff, 1978; Tomlinson, 1980). In a similar vein, Thorn (1980) has related the appearance of public eating facilities to the social and economic reorganization consequent upon modern urbanism, Rubin (1979) has documented the emergence of "signature" structures and franchise architecture, Duffy (1980) has examined office buildings, and Hancock (1980) has described the development of the apartment house.

Nevertheless, Marxian theory is still very weakly developed in relation to the built environment. Indeed, some recent attempts to relate Marxian theory to architectural design (Krier *et al.* 1978; Tafuri, 1976) have not only failed to demonstrate an understanding of traditional Marxist thought

but have also overlooked several key issues which have been hotly debated by contemporary interpreters of Marxist theory (Dickens, 1979). Among other things, these include the consequences of conflict between different factions of capital (Poulantzas, 1973), the function of the state in relation to capitalism (Miliband, 1977; O'Connor, 1973), and the extent to which the dynamic of industrial capitalism is distinctive from, and constrained by, the dynamic of urbanism (Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1972). Equally, the whole field has yet to develop an adequate framework with which to consider the role and degree of autonomy exercised by the urban design professions in shaping the built environment of modern cities. This, perhaps, should be the pivotal topic for any "new sociology" of the built environment.

3. The social context of the design professions

It should be emphasized at the outset that the discussion here will be focused on the broad outcome of professional ideology, organization and praxis rather than the immediate bricks-and-mortar outcome of specific projects designed or refashioned by individual professionals. As Appleyard (1979) notes, architects and planners never seem to have been properly aware of these wider outcomes, even in relation to the more overt symbolism in some of their work. "Professionals see the environment as a physical entity, a functional container, an accumulation of goods or commodities, a setting for social action or programs, a pattern of land uses, a sensuous experience, or a natural ecosystem, but rarely do they see it as a social or political symbol" (1979, 272). There is no suggestion, therefore, that architects and other design professionals are in some way consciously conniving at anything other than their own professional and personal advancement.

It should also be acknowledged that architects have only a limited influence even in the immediate practice of their trade, being constrained by clients, builders, users, and, not least, the institutional framework of legal codes and procedures. Dickens (1981) has recognized these constraints in tracing the changing relations between design and building production from the medieval guild system to the present. He concludes that, as the building industry became capitalist and independent from patronage, the architect evolved as a *mediator* in the particular set of social relations which exploits labor in the production process. Thus, according to Dickens, whilst professional status and codes of conduct help to propagate an image of neutral impartiality, the architect has effectively become an intermediary between, on the one hand, builders seeking to extract profit via the labor market and, on the other, the developers and clients who seek to appropriate surplus value via the land and property market. As Darke and Darke (1981) point out, however, this interpretation of the social role of architecture does not adequately deal with the style, meaning and physical form of the buildings produced.

3.1. *Architectural style and social change*

Following the overall approach outlined in section 2.2., the architect's role as an arbiter, creator and manipulator of style can be interpreted at two inter-related levels: (i) as part of the process whereby changing relationships within society at large become expressed in the "super-structure" of ideas, institutions and objects, and (ii) as part of the process through which the dominant mode of production is able to sustain itself and protect itself from opposing social or ideological forces.

The first of these perspectives allows us to see major shifts in architectural style as a dialectical response to the evolving *zeitgeist* of urban-industrial society – as part of a series of broad intellectual and artistic reactions rather than the product of isolated innovations wrought single-handedly by inspired architects. Thus, for example, the Art Nouveau and Jugendstil architecture of the late nineteenth century can be seen as the architectural expression of the romantic reaction to what Mumford (1961, 470) called the 'paleo-technic' era of the Industrial Revolution; a reaction which was first expressed in the arts and crafts movement and in Impressionist painting. By 1900 the Art Nouveau style was firmly established as the snobbish style, consciously elitist, for all "high architecture". The dialectic response was a series of artistic and intellectual movements, beginning with Cubism, which went out of their way to dramatize modern technology, seeking an anonymous and collective method of design in an attempt to divorce themselves from "capitalist" canons of reputability and power. Thus emerged the Constructivist and Futurist movements, the Bauhaus school and, later, Les Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) and the Modern Architecture Research Group (MARS), who believed "that their new architecture and their new concepts of urban planning were expressing not just a new aesthetic image but the very substance of new social conditions which they were helping to create" (Carter, 1979, 324).

3.1.1. Architectural style and the dynamic of urbanism

The subsequent fusion and transformation of these movements into the glib Esperanto of the International Style and the simultaneous adoption of the style as the preferred image of corporate and bureaucratic conservatism, respectability and solidity provides an important example of the way in which the dominant social order is able to protect itself from opposing ideological forces. In this particular example, the energy of opposing ideological forces – idealist radicalism – has been neatly diverted into the defense of the *status quo*. The question is: how? One answer is that the professional ideology and career structure within which most practising architects (as opposed to the *avant-garde*) operate is itself heavily oriented towards Establishment values and sensitively attuned to the existing institutional setting and economic order. Consequently, the meaning and symbolism of new architectural styles emanating from radical quarters tend to get changed as they are institutionalized and converted into commercialism; while the core movement itself, having forfeited its

raw power, passes quietly into the mythology of architectural education and the coffee-table books of the cognoscenti. There is a direct parallel here in the way in which the liberal ideology of the town planning movement has been transformed into a defensive arm of urbanized capitalism, systematically working to the advantage of the middle class community in general and the business community in particular (Knox and Cullen, 1981a). According to this perspective, architects, like planners, can be seen as unwitting functionaries, part of a series of "internal survival mechanisms" which have evolved to meet the imperatives of urbanized capitalism. This, however, is a theme which clearly needs further exploration. Are architects recruited, for example, from a narrow stratum of middle-class society in much the same way as town planners? And do they exhibit similarly biased values and orientations (Marcus, 1971; Knox and Cullen, 1981b)? If so, can this be linked to a distinctive professional ideology; and can this in turn be shown to have been molded by wider socio-political forces?

Another way in which architects serve to satisfy the imperatives of urbanized capitalism is in helping to stimulate consumption and extract surplus value. As Harvey has emphasized, it is vital, if the capitalist economy is to be successfully maintained, for urbanism to facilitate the manipulation of effective demand in order not only increase consumption but also to ensure the constant circulation of capital (1973, 271). The architect, by virtue of the prestige and mystique socially accorded to creativity, adds exchange value to a building through his or her decisions about design, "so that the label 'architect designed' confers a presumption of quality even though, like the emperor's clothes, this quality may not be apparent to the observer" (Darke and Darke, 1981, 12). Moreover, as one of the key arbiters of style in modern society, the architect is in a powerful position to stimulate consumption merely by generating and/or endorsing changes in the nuances of building design.

The professional ideology and career structure which rewards innovation and the ability to feel the pulse of fashion also serves to promote the *circulation* of capital. Without a steady supply of new fashions in domestic architecture (reinforced by innovations in kitchen technology, leisure equipment, etc.), the filtering mechanisms on which the whole owner-occupier housing market is based would slow down to a level unacceptable not only to builders and developers but also to the "exchange professionals" (surveyors, real estate agents, etc.) and the whole range of financial institutions involved, directly and indirectly, in the housing market. The rich and the upper middle classes, in short, must be encouraged to move from their comfortable homes to new dwellings with even more "design" and "convenience" features in order to help maintain a sufficient turnover in the housing market. One way in which they are enticed to move is through the cachet of fashionable design and up-to-the-minute technology. Hence the rapid diffusion of innovations such as energy-conserving homes; and the desperate search for successful design themes to be revived and "re-released", just like the contrived revivals of haute

couture and pop music. In parts of the United States, the process has advanced to the stage where many upper-middle class suburban developments resemble small chunks of Disneyland, with mock-Tudor, Spanish Colonial, mock-Georgian, Victorian gothic and log cabin *de luxe* standing together: style for style's sake, the *zeit* for sore eyes. And, in some cities, new housing for upper-income groups is now promoted through annual exhibitions aimed at selling "this year's" designs, much like the automobile industry's carefully-planned obsolescence in design.

3.1.2. Urban settings and the social order of the city

It is by no means only "high" architecture which helps to sustain urbanized capitalism. Parkin (1971) has suggested that the maintenance of the entire social system is partly dependent upon the way in which the everyday settings of workplace and neighborhood function to reproduce and "structurate" class relations. In a similar vein, Harvey (1978) and other geographers have emphasized the way in which the location and allocation of urban resources (especially educational resources) help to reproduce a blue-collar workforce from blue-collar neighborhoods, and a white-collar workforce from white collar neighborhoods, for example. Meanwhile, writers such as Bell and Newby (1976) have argued that the emphasis given by planners to neighborhood and community development has served to defuse working class solidarity, producing fragmented and introspective socio-political settings in which the broader issues of resource allocation and class conflict rarely surface. What has not been explored systematically, however, is the way in which architectural design contributes to the "conditioning" of working class populations in distinctive "settings". One of the more straightforward functions of architecture in this respect would seem to be the symbolic distancing of social groups in cities where a high degree of social stratification is accompanied — as in Western Europe — by a high degree of public intervention in the "natural" processes of residential segregation. The aesthetic sterility of most public housing thus serves to "distance" its inhabitants symbolically from other social groups. At a further level, it can be argued that the scarcity of symbolic stimuli typical of many planned, post-war working-class environments may act as a kind of emotional and intellectual straight-jacket, minimizing people's self-esteem and sense of potential and fostering attitudes of deference and defeatism (Cullen and Knox, 1981). Although the whole process is at present very poorly understood, the role of the architect is clearly central to the eventual outcome not only in terms of the social order of the city but also in terms of the existential meaning of urban settings.

4. Conclusions

This brings us to a final consideration which is crucial to the development of a new sociology of the built environment: the role of the *self* in the interaction between society and environment. At this

point, the theoretical perspective offered by Marxian theory offers little help. It is fundamental to Marxian theory that the “spirit” and consciousness of men and women is determined by work and economic activity: human personality consequently becomes “collectivised out of existence” (Barrett, 1974). But, when we move down from high-level generalizations about social process and urban form, we find that people often endow their spatial environments with meaning in ways which are highly individualistic and largely independent of their class or power. This is where environmental psychologists and semiologists must join in and elaborate systematically the variables which determine what kinds of meaning are attached by whom to what structures. Meanwhile, the theoretical lacuna left by Marxian theory might profitably be explored in terms of existential concepts such as ‘topophilia’ (Tuan, 1974), ‘placelessness’ (Relph, 1976), ‘dwelling’ (Heidegger, 1971) and ‘place-ballet’ (Seamon, 1980). It follows that we must accept, in the short term at least, a multi-stranded approach: one which does not attempt to pass for a coherent theory, but which at least accommodates existential imperatives and cognitive processes alongside the social and economic relations of building design. One possible organizing framework for such an approach is shown in Figure 1, which is loosely based on Appleyard’s (1979) “communications model” of environmental action. Accepting architectural design as part

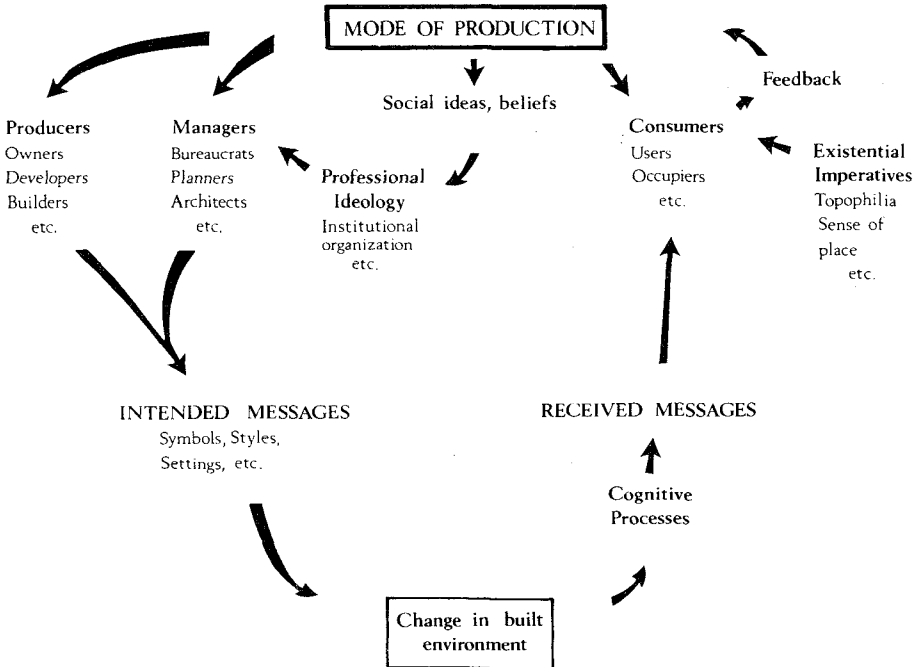


Fig. 1. Signs, symbolism and settings: a framework for analysis.

of the superstructure of culture and ideas stemming from the basic socio-economic organization of society (whether as part of the prevailing ideology or as an expression of counter-ideology), it would be possible to analyse (i) the intended messages emanating from particular owners/producers and mediated by professional "managers" (architects, planners, etc.); and (ii) the received messages of "environmental consumers" as seen through the prisms of cognitive processes and existential imperatives and the filter of the dominant ideology. Equally, such a framework would help to focus on specific issues, such as the professionalism of the design professions. In this way it would at least be possible to move away from the narrow and rather naive view of the built environment implicit in so much of the "mainstream" literature on architecture and behavior.

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