Discussion of Session IV: Orientation and Communication

PANEL: W. A. Mason (Chairman), I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, J. M. Fitch, E. T. Hall, P. Leyhausen, D. Lowenthal

Mason (Chairman):

I would like to open the session with Fitch's comments.

Fitch:

I regret that there are so few architects or urban designers in the audience here today for, after all, we are the specialists to whom the organization of space in the modern world is entrusted. I have to confess that our intervention in these matters is, all too often, every bit as disastrous as Hall has this morning indicated. We tend to intervene fearlessly in all sorts of complicated situations. And it becomes increasingly clear that, ironically, the greater our expertise and the larger the scale of our operations, the more hazardous our interventions seem to become. We have very simplistic ideas of how people behave in space: the consequences of this ignorance are all too evident. In this sense, all the papers we have heard have relevance for architects and urbanists. Today's papers have had a more direct bearing on the subject - Hall's being one of the most suggestive.

I have been interested to note that two of our colleagues who spoke at some length about the social consequences of certain types of spatial organizations neglected to tell us much about the environmental conditions which obtained in those spaces during their observations. This tendency to handle space in abstract terms seems to me to be a characteristic failing on the part of all of us. Yesterday morning, Esser observed that scientists too often tended to regard space as a kind of vacuum in which nothing happened. I share his misgivings.
But architects and planners have another kind of almost endemic conceptual weakness - that is, they tend to regard space as a purely visual construct. Intellectually, of course, they may know better; but the consequence of this basic attitude is that the environment is largely thought of from a visual point of view and its organization, therefore, is regarded as being largely a problem in visual aesthetics. All the other environmental attributes of architectural space - thermal, sonic, olfactory, tactile, etc. - are insufficiently understood or attended to. The result is a high degree of environmental malfunction in even some of our most prestigious new buildings.

Thus the appearance of men from the life sciences in our field is a very encouraging development. The psychologists, for example, are giving us a new understanding of the behavior of people in our buildings and cities. Their emphasis on the role of perception, sensory deprivation and stimulation in human experience and development has obvious significance for environmental designers. Yet even among psychologists, I find a tendency to divorce such phenomena from the environmental matrix in which they necessarily occur. Thus we hear a lot of talk about perception - and hardly any mention of the metabolic base on which all perception obviously rests. Clearly any environment has to satisfy the metabolic requirements of the animal before there can be any perception at all. Thus we will hear a fascinating paper on the behavior of young men in enclosed spaces - presumably in submarines - over long periods of time. But the text contains little or nothing about the environmental conditions under which the tests were run - temperature, air movement, odors, noise and illumination levels, etc. - let alone how behavior might have been modified by the manipulation of such environmental components. This last is the area of primary concern to architects.

As architects, we have already developed certain contacts with physiologists - at least with those specialists who deal with thermal stress, psycho-optics, acoustics and other areas which must furnish the norms for architectural technology. But here we meet another set of obstacles: many of these specialists know little about related fields, even those immediately adjacent to their own, and display little interest in any effort to integrate their data into one experiential whole. This tendency reaches its most acute form with the engineers who operate on the narrowest criteria of economy and efficiency. Though heating and ventilating engineers pay lip service to concepts of comfort and wellbeing, they usually think in terms of b.t.u.'s and cu. ft. per min. Similar blind spots occur in the vision of illuminating and acoustical engineers. Confronted with this kind of disparate and recondite assistance, it is small wonder that the architect often falls between the stools even when he tries to broaden his understanding of experiential reality.

From this point of view a Symposium like this is very stimulating, for it suggests the possibility of extrapolating from such fields as