ARCHITECTURE AND MENTAL SUBNORMALITY

IV. THERAPEUTIC VARIETY — A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS OF DESIGN FOR THE SUBNORMAL

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In this article the architect draws attention to the inadequacy of the professional brief which, by limiting itself to technical details, fails to make the architect aware of particular problems of education and training which could be furthered by attention to them in the design stage. One may legitimately wonder whether this is an oversight or whether too little thought has been given by the client to this important aspect.—The EDITOR.

It goes without saying that any teaching situation frames some predetermined and conscious aim. It does not necessarily follow, though, that the total intention of the educator is effectively conveyed, when the design of buildings is being discussed, to an architect who sees his task simply as a response to the conscious wants of his client, expressed or enshrined in his particular solution.

In accepting, then, that the architect can help in a wider and subtler way, the aspect which seems likely to combine the greatest benefits with the least risk is that which reflects the normal model—the 'ordinary, everyday world'.

In the first article in this series, (Gunzburg, 1967), a plea was entered for a built environment which, while satisfying specific needs, goes further and provides not only places in which everyone concerned may feel involved, and thus alive, but also for the subnormal users, an unnoticed but continuing 'lesson' in socialization.

Accept that the architect understands, and can interpret rationally enough, his specific brief, his next best ally could be his own understanding of a wide range of ordinary experiences upon which he can draw, to the benefit of his client, though perhaps to the distress of his own indiosyncrasies.

Cases vary so: it is difficult to particularize a generality. Imagine, however, a training workshop in which light industrial tasks will be learnt and performed. The model for this could be the ordinary small factory of today, where cost limits are applied quite as rigorously by the private client as in, say, a training centre by the Local Authority. Immediately one has a series of 'clues', each drawn from, and retaining in the new work, the 'normal' situation. Remember that although teachers can adapt to anything (they have to!) the subnormal student requires, for his best develoment, conditions which

(a) extend his potential abilities by stimulating and exercising them
(b) prepare him by use-example for situations likely to be found outside the education milieu which, lacking such preparation, could involve him in familiarization setback of a more or less severe nature, depending upon the adaptability of the student himself.

Apart from the 'specific' central component of a building for light industrial tasks the architect has to design or specify a wide range of ancillary components: these will either be spaces, or things, or both, and they can reproduce the 'norm' or they can ignore it.

A series of examples will illustrate this point, although I would stress that the architect (unless as sometimes happens, he cannot obtain guidance) should not be

the arbiter of priorities—choices always have to be made—he should simply have a wide awareness of possibilities and point these out to his clients. However, even the architect can insist that the teaching situation should extend beyond the central 'task' and embrace the totality of the student's living/working/learning day.

So, on entry, the time clock can anticipate a future check-point, in both senses of the phrase, to which students may have to submit. In changing rooms the architect can arrange for a certain variety so that a routine experience can tend to extend, rather than lull, the student. Taps vary; soap dispensers differ; lavatory plugs pull, push or turn as do the handles and locks of their doors. Some lavatory paper comes from a roll, some from a packet, some is 'hard', some soft, and all types should be familiar. The difference between the 'Towelmaster' and the roller towel can best be pointed by installing one of each and calling upon chance to provide the experience of both.

Extend the principle to windows which operate from handles which twist, from slides which push-pull, from catches requiring the use of a pole or lines: arrange these variants so that, as if by chance, the student finds himself sometime or other called upon to use—and thus adapt to—all these ways of doing an apparently simple thing; opening or closing a window.

Take another important element in any situation—a self-service canteen. Here is one of the few social (or off-duty) situations in the course of a job-day. Canteens vary mainly in the method of paying for the meal they provide you with: machines can sell tickets for a fixed meal, or for parts of a meal. Staff can take money for meals, or they can issue slips on payment against which meals or part . . . . and so on: on the other hand, payment can be against food actually taken at the self-service counter and this means, bear with me, dealing not just with money, but stopping with food on a tray, tea also perhaps *and* then handling money, taking and pocketing change, picking up tray and negotiating (now back on common ground) journey to table, deposit tray, pick up plates and all the rest.

Note that in the following simple sentence (forming part of an architect's brief) "Meals will be taken in canteen to seat X Nos. self-service from kitchen servery", the architect can—while in each case answering his brief: —

(a) limit options by failing to recognize them
(b) recognize that perhaps four or five alternative 'realities' will face the student in day-to-day life, just to get his meal to a table, and plan so that the educator can ring a full change upon them
(c) recognise (b) but limited perhaps by money, provide something better than (a), without overstressing in priority terms the full range of different solutions to this one, physically quite restricted, example of a functional activity.

Space around and leading to buildings designed for the subnormal can be exploited as an educational element, even if the stimuli are less obvious and the response less easily evaluated.

For example: Paving surfaces vary—asphalte on slopes is slippery in frost but commonly experienced and its dangers can be learned under controlled conditions if the architect knows his business.

In certain cases, particularly where the institution/school/training centre is far from a town or active area, it may be necessary to 'import' certain aspects of day-to-day life where this can be done without prejudice to a policy which (except very exceptionally) today supports maximum interaction between normal and subnormal members of society. So a telephone kiosk may be incorporated in a new complex, or, under pressure, the G.P.O. could be persuaded to install one in the locality which is accessible from the (say) training centre.

The same principles apply to traffic experiences. These can be sought locally, and supplemented within the centre by, say, the provision and use of more than one

method of car parking, more than one cycle parking system, and a refusal to separate the subnormal from risks found in the day-to-day life for which the centre is preparing them

In the end, the essential of variety *as derived from the everyday* is that it exposes phenomenons to which the normal adapt, usually without too much difficulty, but which the subnormal can find very upsetting until they learn about them.

This phenomenon is the performance of similar functions by very dissimilar methods and although no case is being here made out for an ill-organised architectural shambles masquerading in the guise of 'variety' the many headed solution to the single headed problem is a fact of life.

Now all this may seem to ask the architect that he should take a problem and reversing his usual processes, *complicate* it. Not so; it is simply that the architect should recognize the impact that variety has upon the subnormal. This impact is not so far removed from that experienced by the action of the same stimuli upon the 'normal', but it is at once both less and more immediate. To the extent that an experience activates, it will do so more slowly than with a normal subject; to the extend that it checks or puzzles—more rapidly.

The great value of variety, therefore, is that it at once extends the individual and prepares him for (partly protecting him from) setbacks, by foreseeing, in terms of buildings and built situations, as wide a range of likelihood as possible.

In the third article in this series, (Lapuh, 1968), it was concluded that "existing buildings, sympathetically adapted . . . are frequently more satisfactory . . . than many new buildings designed to specific standards." Without invading the area covered by that article, one can support this claim on the additional ground that old buildings, adapted, provide the user with a sort of built catalogue of possibilities, each one a product of some time/activity sequence which represents the history of the building in question and adding to a total result which is varied in the positive sense proposed in this article. Old buildings can teach lessons to those capable of being taught and can thus contribute to the value of new ones.

If what emerges is a claim for day-to-day derived and oriented physical variety this would seem to be a good starting point for therapeutic architecture. Less esoteric than colour and texture studies which, valuable as they must be, involve expertise of a high and rare order, the easily recognizable criteria of ordinary life would seem impossible to dispute, simple to realize, not too difficult to evaluate and amenable to feedback applications. These last can add, in an intelligible way, to what little is really known about the therapeutic value of buildings, and the built environment, to the great encouragement of specialists and their architects.

Conclusions

1. Functional variety is a fact of life and can be exploited both to stimulate and to protect the subnormal.
2. Exploitation of this variety provides the architect and educator/specialist with a potentially useful extension to the specific teaching/socialization programme.
3. Experience from feedback analysis should be relatively easy to amass and to apply—because the task is not over subtle.
4. The Architect will become a more positive element in the therapeutic process: his co-ordinating faculties will be extended rather than stultified.

References:

Gunzburg, A. (1967). Architecture for social rehabilitation. Montpellier—a turning point. *J. Mentl. Subnorm.* XIII No. 25, 84-87.

Lapuh, M. (1968). Material standards in the architecture for the mentally subnormal. *J Mentl. Subnorm.* XIV, No. 26, 59-61.