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Selected Works of David Canter



DAVID CANTER

A **Psychology Press** Book

# Readings on the Psychology of Place

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# **Readings on the Psychology of Place**

Selected Works of David Canter

**David Canter**

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# Preface

By the 1980s, a small but dedicated community of academics and some practitioners were studying psychological aspects of people's interactions with their surroundings. As explored in my article (reproduced here) describing *architectural psychology*, the origins of these studies had been the practical concerns about designing buildings so that they were more effective for their users. But by the 1980s, the interest in human experience and use of their physical contexts had broadened. Architectural psychology had been subsumed under the wide-ranging umbrella of environmental psychology. This latter area is evolving to focus on the important issues of human response to climate change and how people may be persuaded to modify their environmentally related activities.

The emerging focus on this 'green environmental psychology' led to a reduced interest in the earlier research, carried out during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Those studies, and contributions to many aspects of design, were overshadowed by the pressing need to connect with behavioural aspects of the many environmental challenges. However, in recent years, there has been a reawakening of interest in those earlier studies. This is demonstrated, for example, by the book by Lily Bernheimer (2017) and, most recently, the book by my former student and later colleague, Ian Donald (2022). That reawakening has encouraged a reappraisal of the significance of the earlier research. It is contributing to understanding how those psychological processes underlying human transactions with the physical environment are at the heart of any climate-relevant behaviour.

One particular aspect of the early research has not been ignored. This is the study of 'place' as an aspect of experience, as distinct from a mere space or location. This was first elaborated in my book *The Psychology of Place* (Canter, 1977), the introductory summary of which is reproduced here. There has since been a great outpouring of studies and publications around the theory and applications of this way of thinking about places. It is, therefore, appropriate to bring together in the present volume a set of earlier publications that elaborate the details of this seminal theory. These earlier works are complemented by more recent studies which build directly on that initial research.

Most of these publications emerged in a pre-digital age. Consequently, they are not as readily available as subsequent publications. Furthermore, many of them were published in books of readings or relatively obscure journals because that was where

the interest was in the topics. This also make them more difficult to access. Therefore, bringing them together here provides a valuable resource for those who wish to understand the origins and engage directly with the many strands of *The Psychology of Place*.

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## Part 1

# Origins of the theory of place

At the age of 21, I embarked on a PhD with the Pilkington Research Unit in the Department of Building Science at the University of Liverpool (although my PhD was registered and officially supervised in the Department of Psychology). The topic of the PhD, awarded in 1969, was ‘The Psychological Implications of Office Size’.<sup>1</sup> This was formulated within a simple-minded experimental psychology tradition. The assumption was that the larger the office, the more distractions, so the poorer the performance of office workers in those rooms. This was a ‘determinist’ assumption about the impact of the environment on behaviour. As illustrated in the 1968 article, reproduced here from the *Architects’ Journal*, the results challenged that assumption.

In the tradition of field experiments, I got people to complete clerical tests in different-sized offices. These varied from rooms with only a few people in to those with over 100 in. Some of the office workers were tested in the office in which they normally worked. Others were tested in offices of a different size from their usual room. To my confusion, I found no change on the test scores for people tested in different offices but a clear indication that the larger the office in which they normally worked, the poorer their scores. After much head scratching, I realized that I was identifying something about the sorts of people who worked in offices of different sizes. I was not measuring the direct impact of the environment on their performance.

This turned my determinist assumptions on their head. For one reason or another, people of differing clerical abilities seemed to be drifting towards offices that housed different numbers of workers. In the early 1960s, when my data were collected, there were high levels of employment. People could choose where they wanted to work. Therefore, one assumption could be that people who liked working in large open offices would accept jobs there. Those who did not like that possibility would not. There were also likely to be status issues about who ended up in which offices. These considerations led to the awareness that people make use of buildings in relation to their understanding of the possibilities these offer. This understanding relies to some extent on the users’, or potential users’, interpretation of any particular physical context – in a word, the ‘meaning’ of that environment.

Remarkably (I think, for the young researcher I was then), I did indicate in this first paper, which was presented as an illustration of the possibilities for research in architecture, that there was a need ‘to build theoretical models which explain, in

## 2 *Origins of the theory of place*

detail, the relationships between the disciplines of architecture and that of psychology' (page 881). The subsequent quarter of a century of my research struggled with aspects of this possibility.

The starting point for developing 'theoretical models' was to explore what architecture is *for*. This may initially seem obvious, but there is a crucial distinction between civil engineering and architecture. I did develop the consideration of this distinction a few years later (Canter, 1977), but the initial idea was to explore the functions of architecture. The need for an account of that exploration was also published in the *Architects' Journal* and reprinted in the present volume.

It draws attention to three ways in which buildings function:

- as a filter – keeping nasty things (like noise) out and letting good things (such as daylight) in;
- as a social facilitator – providing the spatial opportunities to house various activities and the potential relationship between those activities; and
- as a signifier – providing possibilities for the interpretation of the meaning of buildings and the spaces they house.

This latter point was rather contentious at the time because there was still the myth enshrined in the slogan 'form follows function', somehow indicating that the design of a building was merely a reflection of the uses to which it was to be put. However, once it was acknowledged that one function of a building is to indicate what those purposes are with all the cultural and status overtones that implies, then the idea that a building was just an engineering project, 'a machine for living in' as Le Corbusier famously announced, is no longer sustainable.

The implication of this perspective is summarized in that 1970 paper as the following:

building type categorisation is often inadequate.

For example, modern office buildings are . . . the same inside and out. Yet what goes on in them . . . are quite different. The head office of an organisation making a specialised product has quite a different hierarchy from, say, an insurance company. A cellular block of offices might be right for one but not for the other.

(page 301)

I like to think that this perspective fed into the debates emerging in architecture in the early 1970s, about approaches to building design, and the need to recognize the meanings that buildings carried. This was articulated by the architect and architectural commentator Charles Jenks (1977). He expropriated a concept from discussions in English literature of 'post-modernism'. Most importantly, he argued that post-modern architecture has a 'language'.

What Jenks did not do was to take the next step and recognize that languages have listeners who may or may not understand what is being said. My discovery of

what people brought to their interactions with buildings was opening up as much a perspective that saw them as agents, not passive users. The rather neat title of the paper (reproduced here) that I gave at the legendary 1969 Dalandhui conference (Canter, 1970), 'Should we treat building users as subjects of objects?', encapsulated a debate which resonates still today. One intriguing study in my paper, which never found a more conventional journal outlet, was the consideration of where students at the Architectural Association, London, School of Architecture chose to sit, in a seminar series I gave, when I arranged the layout of the room in different ways. Quite remarkably, they sat at the front when it was a semi-circular layout but at the back when laid out in straight rows. In those late 1960s days, the AA (as it was known) was somewhat radical. I still remember that the babies taken to my seminar series were not as great a distraction as the dogs brought along. In this context, the reading of the nature of the particular seminar was clearly derived from the layout of the room with the consequent decision of whether to attend the event and, if so, where to sit.

It was from this consideration of how people read a room that it occurred to me that the context in which a person is seen could carry meanings about that person. The study for which I supervised an architect, Roger Wools (reprinted here), did indeed demonstrate the power of the context on judgements of people. This idea was elaborated many years later by Sam Gosling (2008) in his popular book. This idea has subsequently been reflected in various television game shows in which people have to guess who the owner is of homes presented to them. Sam's attempt to participate in such guesses were often not very successful, demonstrating the complexity of these relationships. A follow-up study I did with videos instead of still photographs gave such complex results that it was yet another interesting study that never got published.

By the mid-1970s, I was seeking to broaden the reach of my work. The previous focus on buildings and rooms seemed to me to be an unnecessary limitation. A remarkable one-year Leverhulme fellowship to Japan had opened my eyes to the relevance of psychological considerations to larger environmental contexts. The ways in which we build up our understanding of cities had intrigued me as I started to learn how to navigate around Tokyo. I was, therefore, curious about the accuracy with which people generate ideas of where things are, especially how far away they are. From my background in laboratory studies of perception, it occurred to me that in a city where locations cannot be immediately seen, there must be some internal representation. How did this relate to the representation of maps? A very straightforward study suggested itself, examining the estimates people made of distances (reproduced here).

By this stage, I had started to use a form of statistical analysis that has proven powerful ever since. This is the representation of relationships as distances in a notional space. However, in the case of distance estimation, it was possible to represent average distant estimates as distances in a notional space. That representation could be compared with other representations. In the complex city layout of Tokyo, there is a public transport system that is represented as a circle, but on an actual map, it is much more elliptic. It was, therefore, rather interesting to see that the spatial representation



of distance estimates was much closer to a circle than an ellipse. This really paved the way for recognizing that places are as much mental representations as geographical ones. Writing my widely cited book, *The Psychology of Place*, was a journey for me, exploring the psychological implications of places. The introductory summary of that book is reproduced here.

The widely quoted and elaborated framework developed in that book from a variety of research sources is that places are aspects of experience that combine physical, conceptual and action facets. These three are always present, helping to indicate what a place is. The implications of this triumvirate have been developed through theories and practice.

### **Note**

- 1 Available in the University of Liverpool Library.

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# 1 Architectural psychology

*David Canter*

Architectural psychology (known, unsurprisingly, in German as Architekturpsychologie) is an area of social research and practice that considers the implications for human experience, thoughts and actions of interactions with the built and natural environment. Its initial heyday was in the late 1960s and early 1970s with a seminal conference in Scotland in 1969 (Canter, 1970) and another in Australia in 1974 (Canter, 1974) and a book of original research the same year (Canter and Lee, 1974). The term fell into disuse but is making something of a comeback in the 2020s, with a number of design and research groups using the term to describe their activities. There was a psychology and architecture conference at the University of Texas in 2016<sup>1</sup> and a conference using the term was planned in Germany for 2021.

The area of study emerged as the Second World War came to an end. At that time, there was a growing democratization of politics combined with awareness of changes in society. This meant people in authority could no longer decide for the population at large. The growth of the social sciences also reflected a move towards a more systematic understanding of individual and social behaviour of relevance to many areas of decision making. Those in power could no longer be relied on to understand how people lived. In architecture, this was mirrored by a move towards a more scientific basis for design decision making, reflected in the U.K. in the 1951 Festival of Britain which foregrounded the contribution of science and engineering to modern society, including many aspects of building design.

Across Europe, there were government-funded projects, starting in the 1950s, to provide guidelines for the massive building programme after the destruction of the Second World War. In the U.K., there were initially studies for housing (Morris, 1961), then offices, shops and railway premises, then schools and hospitals. These studies, typically conducted by civil servants and sociologists, tended to focus on appropriate levels of spatial provision for different activities. Other early studies were carried out mainly by physicists and engineers. They examined aspects of thermal comfort, noise annoyance (e.g., Griffiths and Langdon, 1968, who were actually experimental psychologists) and the implications of lighting levels, especially daylight penetration into homes and offices. Much of this work related directly to the impact of the physical environment on productivity (Osborne and Gruneberg, 1983).

The scientific trend in architecture gave rise to research units, such as that funded by the plate glass manufacturer, Pilkington, who set up the Pilkington Research Unit, initially studying daylight penetration, then office design (Manning, 1965) and, subsequently, schools. This then developed into the multidisciplinary Building Performance Research Unit (Markus et al., 1972). A Europe-wide research association grew out of these studies, the International Association for People Environment Studies (IAPS), with the rather more elegant Australian acronym PAPER (People and the Physical Environment Research).

The origins in the U.S. in the late 1950s and early 1960s were requests from architects to psychiatrists and psychologists for guidance on the design of buildings which housed people that the designers considered to be very different from themselves, notably psychiatric patients and children. An early account by the psychiatrist Osmond (1957) introduced the then rather novel idea that the function of a psychiatric ward should be the basis for design. This was the start of a stream of research that laid the foundations for architectural psychology in the U.S. This gave rise to the Environmental Design Research Association (EDRA) which is still active today.

These developments were encouraged by three early publications from the U.S. which had paved the way for the consideration of the spatial aspects of human activities and experience with architectural implications, Lynch's (1960) *The Image of the City*, Sommer's (1969) *Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design* and Rapoport's (1969) *House Form and Culture*.

The area of study broadened out to cover aspects of landscape experience and the meaning of building forms. Consequently, although the term 'architectural psychology' was widely used, many of those involved were not psychologists and the areas of study went far beyond those aspects of the environment over which architects have control. This has included somewhat limited studies of the psychology of architects and architectural decision making.

Not long after the designation of the existence of architectural psychology through conferences in the U.S. and the U.K., the label environmental psychology was introduced in the U.S. with the establishment in New York of an environmental psychology doctoral programme. Although much of the early research under this umbrella dealt directly with aspects of buildings, the promotional power of U.S. researchers led to the term nudging the label architectural psychology out of common use. With the advent of the 'environmental movement' and the growing awareness of a climate crisis, many social scientists became involved in what might be called 'green environmental psychology'. In many cases, this is an aspect of social psychology dealing with attitudes to climate change and related actions such as recycling and being more 'environmentally friendly'. With that broadening of the meaning of environmental psychology, architectural psychology became identified as a particular area of the wider field. This does add some confusion because there are important epistemological differences between green environmental psychology and architectural psychology.

From its earliest days, there were theoretical explorations of the ways in which people interact with their surroundings. This is often confusingly couched in questions about the impact of buildings on human actions and experiences. These

questions are based on the assumption of what is known as 'architectural determinism'. This is the belief that buildings directly shape what people think, feel and do. A commonly cited quotation from Winston Churchill in his discussion of the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament after being damaged during the Second World War captures the complexity of even an elementary view of the influence of architecture: 'We shape our buildings, and after that, they shape us'. The interactive nature illustrated by Churchill point to the limits of buildings' determining human actions. Many studies show that, except at the extremes of environmental conditions, people are remarkably flexible in their response to the physical environment. Therefore, more complex theories have emerged that explore what people bring to their use and experience of buildings as much as what influence buildings have on them.

A central theory to emerge as part of the move away from a strongly determinist perspective draws on the concept of 'place' (Canter, 1977). This is proposed as an aspect of experience in which physical, social, emotional and behavioural facets are all combined. The central premise is that all actions and experiences are spatial and all spaces carry implications for actions and experiences. In its most extreme form, this is embedded in a phenomenological perspective that accepts 'being-in-place' as a wholistic aspect of living (recently reviewed by one of the leading thinkers of this approach, Seamon, 2018). This has its origins in the musings of the French 'philosopher' Bachelard (1958). Although, intriguingly, many geographers seem to have gotten bored with map-making, and this phenomenological viewpoint now typically dominates areas of social/human geography (e.g., Malpas, 1999).

One particular strand of theory building has been the exploration of the meaning of places. This has taken on the form of elaborating how and what meanings buildings stimulate. This connected with an emerging interest in semiotics and was given impetus by Jencks's declaration of the existence of a 'post-modern architecture' (Jencks, 1977). As long as the dominant style in architecture followed the (rather ambiguous) slogan ascribed to Le Corbusier of 'form follows function', the idea that buildings carried meaning was something of an anathema. Once that idea was undermined, there was room for consideration of what the significance of physical forms might be. Early work brought together by architects Broadbent (1980) and Rapoport (1982) provided a variety of perspectives in how buildings generate meanings. The meaning of places is still an active area of scholarship (Castello, 2010).

Research into architectural psychology takes on many different forms (Groat and Wang, 2002). In general, it eschews laboratory studies because they provide such a distinct context that all that can be studied there is the laboratory experience itself. The research design, regarded as the golden standard in experimental research, of the double-blind controlled trial makes little sense when studying people's experience of buildings. They always have a related reason for being there, a role in the building, which cannot be readily simulated for the purpose of research. The practical and ethical challenges of randomly assigning people to different physical environment also limits the use of this research design.

However, the ease of showing people pictures of places and asking them to react to those images has nonetheless provided a trend in publications which has been

enhanced with the facility provided by digital media, notably videos and virtual reality representations. Surveys and various forms of interviews, which relate directly to architectural experiences, have tended to be the favoured form of research. Within the phenomenological tradition, these interviews have usually been open-ended explorations of direct experience, often bordering on autobiography or descriptive journalism.

The influence of architectural psychology is difficult to pinpoint, in part because of the amorphous nature of architecture and the many different stakeholders, such as owners, planning authorities, managers and (rarely) potential users, who influence architectural decision making. However, the ways in which architectural education and the fashion for grand architecture has changed over the past half-century must, to some extent, have been influenced by the debates in architectural psychology. These have included the recognition that people bring their own perspective and aspirations to the use of any buildings and that the idea of 'function' in architecture carries a complex mixture of psychological implications, an issue discussed directly in the early days of architectural psychology (Canter, 1970). The involvement of potential users in the design of buildings, with all the benefits that it brings, can also be seen as influenced by concepts and research drawn from architectural psychology.

## Note

1 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCYApmWq\\_\\_k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCYApmWq__k)

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