

URBAN DESIGN AS A MECHANISM FOR
FACILITATING AND SUSTAINING SOCIAL CONTACT

A Thesis

Submitted to

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of City Planning

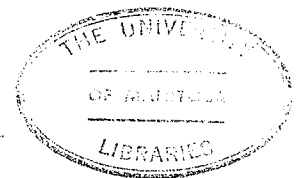
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INTRODUCTION

Alienation has become one of the more pervasive characteristics of modern man. It is present in many North American urbanites and this can be said to be undesirable. Alienation is not good because it results in unhealthy and unhappy people.

Alienated people are lonely.¹ The loneliness which characterizes alienation is not the acute and temporary type produced by the loss of a significant object. Rather, it is a much deeper loneliness. People carry with them the feeling that they actually do not belong, that they are not really a part of things. The anxiety that results is very great and people go to lengths to try to reduce its effects. Some turn to alcohol and others to drugs.² Many become addicted. If the loneliness is particularly extreme, mental illness may result. People may lose touch with reality and suffer from such problems as neurosis or psychosis.

Alienated people experience deep frustration.³ They carry with them a continual sense of opposition between their own wishes and desires and the wishes and desires of those around them. They

¹William W. Meissner, "Alienation in Psychiatric Perspective," ed. William C. Bier. Alienation: Plight of Modern Man. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1972), pp. 68.

²Ibid.

³Herman Lantz, "Number of Childhood Friends as Reported in the Life Histories of a Psychiatrically Diagnosed Group of 1,000," Marriage and Family Living, 18, 1(May, 1956), p. 108.

also feel that their wishes, desires and ambitions are being denied by others. The continuing frustration which results leads to either a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness or rage. When the former feeling predominates, people may resort to any number of pathological forms of behavior to alleviate the sense of frustration -- again they may turn to drink or take drugs.⁴ When the latter, rage, dominates the type of behavior manifest is more rebellious. People may enter into senseless acts of violence - some of the more common being assault or vandalism.⁵

Alienation, it appears, can result in unfavourable consequences. In this thesis an attempt is made to solve the alienation problem. A theory as to the cause of alienation is advanced in the first chapter and a method by which alienation can be reduced or eliminated is discussed in the second.

Alienation is posited to be the result of the lack of meaningful social contact between people, the type of contact which can be found in good friendships. Friendships are a sign of healthy human relationships.⁶ They are a source of satisfaction and pleasure to people and they help people to lead happier and more complete lives.⁷ Where friendships are lacking, alienation seems to appear. Where there are friendships, the likelihood of alienation is much reduced.

⁴Meissner, p. 68.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Richard A. Kalish. The Psychology of Human Behavior, (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1973), p. 245.

⁷Ibid., p. 246.

Urban design is a complex discipline which includes aspects of aesthetics, engineering, economics and so forth. In a narrow interpretation of the term, urban design can be used as a mechanism to help the formation of friendships. Friendships have the greatest probability of developing between people who are similar and who live close to each other.^{8,9,10} By designing environments for given groups of people, similar people can be attracted to a certain area and, as a result, the likelihood of friendships forming between them can be increased. The creation of residential nuclei of homogeneous people is proposed as a major means of combating alienation.

Alienation is a very complex problem and the above is by no means the only way of dealing with the difficulty. Friendships are also able to develop outside of residential environments, and urban design can foster friendship formation in other areas. It is possible, for instance, by designing for a wide range of leisure and recreational activities, to attract similar people, because of common preferences, to certain facilities. Friendship formation can thus be encouraged and alienation opposed in this manner. It is, however, impossible to discuss in this thesis all the ways in which urban design can be used to encourage friendship formation in the

⁸Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter and Kurt Back, Social Pressures in Informal Groups, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 34.

⁹Herbert J. Gans, People and Plans, (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 152.

¹⁰Robin M. Williams, Jr., "Friendship and Social Values in a Suburban Community: An Exploratory Study," The Pacific Sociological Review, 2, 1(Spring, 1959), p. 9.

city because of the volume of work involved, therefore, the discussion will centre on the residential environment where the probability of friendship formation appears to be the greatest.

Critics of both the suburban and inner city environments abound. Suburbia has been depicted as a cold, dreary, sterile place in which to live, where everything is standardized, and where people can lose their individuality.^{11,12,13,14,15} The inner city, with its high density apartment living, has been seen by many to be equally as undesirable but for different reasons.^{16,17,18,19} Many do not find the traffic and the noise at all appealing. These environments, however, do have their benefits. They are good in the sense that they can provide a setting where certain people can form

¹¹Ada Louise Huxtable, "Clusters Instead of Slurbs," New York Times Magazine, (February 9, 1964), pp. 37-44.

¹²John Keats, The Crack in the Picture Window (1956).

¹³Catherine Marshall, "What's Happening to our Homeowners?" Suburbia Today (July, 1964).

¹⁴Stanley Rowland, Jr., "Suburbia Buys Religion," Nation, 183, 4(July 28, 1956), p. 78.

¹⁵William H. Whyte, Jr., The Organization Man (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1957).

¹⁶C. A. Doxiadis, "Urban Environment and Housing for Man," ed. Vasily Kouskoulas, Urban Housing (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1973), p. 10.

¹⁷Pearl Jephcott, Homes in High Flats, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1971), p. 1.

¹⁸Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, Families in High Rise Apartments, Toronto (May, 1973), pp. 2, 9, 12, 13.

¹⁹Anthony Sutcliffe, "Introduction," ed. Anthony Sutcliffe, Multi-Story Living (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1974), p. 3.

friendships. People will choose an environment over another according to their needs and preferences. Similar people, because of this process, will move towards one environment over the other, increasing the probability of friendship formation. This process, however, in North American urban areas is not operating at its most efficient level. Urban environments, especially residential, have continued to follow very general patterns and designs. As a result, enough environmental choices whether suburban or inner city, have not been provided and similar people have not been encouraged to get together as well as they could be. More choices can be provided by designing for nuclei of homogeneous people and for facilities which would cater to people of similar interests.

In Chapter Three, examples as to how the alienation problem can be solved through use of the preceding method are presented.

CHAPTER I

THE THEORY

Alienation

The idea of alienation is not one which is new to man. The theme of outcastness, estrangement and loss, is an archetypal theme present throughout human life and history. Keniston has written that:

Adam and Eve were estranged from God and outcast from Eden and since then in every tradition known, themes of irrevocable loss of former closeness abound in myth, literature, history and life.¹

Formal discussions on the subject began as long as 150 years ago. It would be thought that a concept which has been so popular and which has received so much attention over the years would have a clear-cut, well-formed definition. This, however, is not the case. Alienation remains one of the most common and yet one of the vaguest concepts there are.² The problem appears to be that there are many different types of alienation and there is yet no consensus as to one definition which would fit all.³ Man, it seems, can be alienated

¹Kenneth Keniston, "The Varieties of Alienation: An Attempt at 'Definition'," ed. Ada W. Finifter, Alienation and the Social System (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972), p. 32.

²Igor S. Kon, "The Concept of Alienation in Modern Sociology," Social Research, 34, 3 (Autumn, 1967), p. 507.

³Irene Taviss, "Changes in the Forms of Alienation: The 1900's vs. The 1950's," The American Sociological Review, 34, 1 (February, 1969), p. 46.

from almost anything - himself, his work, other people, his God.^{4,5} Each type of alienation has largely been dealt with separately and definitions have been formulated accordingly.

The alienation of concern to this thesis is the alienation of people from other people. There is no suitable definition in the literature for this type of alienation, but one can be developed using a method put forward by Keniston.⁶

Keniston's system, to define the various types of alienation, can effectively handle old or new variations. According to Keniston, all alienations have one thing in common - the feeling of an absence or loss of a previous or desirable relationship.⁷ Where he feels they differ are in the following four ways:

1. In their focus. There has to be an alienation from someone or something;
2. In what replaces the previous relationship;
3. In what mode the alienation is manifest; and
4. In the agent of the alienation.⁸

By asking questions which pertain to the above differences about the alienation of people from other people an acceptable definition can be achieved.

⁴John Rowan, The Social Individual (London: Davis-Poynter, 1973, p. 233.

⁵Keniston, p. 33

⁶Ibid., pp. 32-45.

⁷Ibid., p. 34.

⁸Ibid., p. 34.

1. What is the focus of the alienation?

People are alienated from other people. Considering the number of people who are present in urban areas the list could be endless - people could be alienated from their next-door neighbour, the mailman, the grocer, and so forth.

2. What replaces the lost or absent relationship?

People withdraw into their own personal worlds. They seek satisfaction by elaboration of parts of their selves.⁹

3. How does the alienation manifest itself?

People become detached from other people.¹⁰ They tend to become impersonal and indifferent in their dealings with other people.¹¹ They appear not to care. In more extreme cases, pathological behaviors such as drinking and taking drugs may be exhibited. People may withdraw completely and suffer from some form of mental illness.

4. What is the agent of the alienation?

People themselves are their own agents. They are the ones who make the turn inward.

The alienation, then, of concern to this thesis can be defined as the alienation of people from other people which leads to the withdrawal of people into their own personal worlds, which, in turn, results in their becoming indifferent or uncaring towards others or exhibiting anti-social or pathological behaviors.

The above type of alienation can be found in contemporary North American cities. Many authors have written about the impersonality and superficiality of human relationships in these urban areas.

⁹Meissner, p. 55.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 55.

¹¹Ibid., p. 64.

Wirth has felt that the relationships among many North American city dwellers to be "largely anonymous, superficial and transitory."¹² Simmel viewed urbanites as uncaring and withdrawn, possessing a "blasé attitude."¹³ Alexander has seen most of their relationships as being unsatisfying and trivial.¹⁴ Some also, like Alexander, have felt that the alienation of people from other people, if it is extreme, can result in social pathologies.¹⁵ Alexander has mentioned schizophrenia and delinquency.¹⁶

The above type of alienation can be said to be on the increase. Gerson has written that complaints of feeling lost, separated and alienated are more frequent now in North American cities than in the past.¹⁷ Riesman has argued that the trend towards the isolated, lonely and alienated character-type in society has been increasing with time.¹⁸ The results of occasional surveys in cities across the United States have also supported this assumption.¹⁹

¹²Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," The American Journal of Sociology, 44, 1 (July, 1938), pp. 1-24.

¹³Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," rev. ed. edited by Paul K. Hatt and Albert J. Reiss, Jr., Cities and Society (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1951), p. 638.

¹⁴Christopher, Alexander, "The City as a Mechanism for Sustaining Human Contact," ed. William R. Ewald, Environment for Man (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1967), p. 61.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 68-73.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁷Wolfgang Gerson, Patterns of Urban Living (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 23.

¹⁸David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1950).

¹⁹"Report of the Harris Poll." The Washington Post, 7 December 1972, p. 413.

In the introduction, alienation was said to be undesirable. Its presence in North American cities and the trend towards increase, thus, must be viewed as an unfavourable condition. The cause of this alienation of people from other people is the subject of discussion in the following section.

Meaningful Social Contact

Modern urban society has more contact and communication in it than any other society in human history. People have contact with more people than they ever have had in the past. The problem is that these contacts have not been of the type that people most require. They have not been meaningful.^{20,21}

What is meant by the phrase "meaningful social contact?" The intimate contact that Alexander writes about is very similar to meaningful social contact and the terms could almost be used synonymously. Alexander defines intimate contact as "that close contact between two individuals in which they reveal themselves in all their weaknesses without fear."²² He characterizes the above relationship as one "in which the barriers which normally surround the self are down," and one which is demonstrated in the best marriages and all true friendships."²³

²⁰Wirth, p. 1.

²¹Alexander, pp. 61-62.

²²Alexander, p. 62.

²³Ibid.

It is felt, however, by this author, that his definition and his characterization are too rigid. In his definition, he states that for an intimate contact to occur individuals must reveal themselves in all their weaknesses. It can be seriously questioned whether this is ever the case. It certainly would be the exception. In defining meaningful social contact, then, a slight modification has been introduced -- meaningful social contact is seen as that contact between two individuals in which they reveal themselves in many of their weaknesses without fear.

In his characterization, Alexander sees the relationship between two individuals as one in which the barriers which normally surround the self are down. Again it can be seriously questioned whether this is ever the case. It would be difficult to prove one way or the other, as many of an individual's barriers are unconscious. A person would not know for sure himself if they were down or not. It can, however, be reasonably assumed that some would have to be down if a person was to be able to talk about things of a personal nature.

He also sees the relationship as occurring only in the best marriages and only in true friendships. It is felt that, once more, he is being too restrictive. In this thesis, as a result, good marriages and all friendships are included in the characterization.

What evidence is there that lack of meaningful social contact results in alienation? Unfortunately, the evidence which is available lends support only to the extreme version of the hypothesis, that is, that the extreme lack of meaningful social contact is

related to the extreme forms of alienation. Evidence for the milder version does not exist because the necessary research has not been carried out. On the basis of the evidence for the extreme version, however, it can be inferred that a relationship also exists for the milder.

Faris and Dunham, in the 1930's, studied the distribution of mental disorders in Chicago.²⁴ They found that many schizophrenias (mental disorders characterized by loss of touch with reality) had their highest rates of occurrence among hotel residents and lodgers, and people who lived in the rooming house district of the city. In other words, among those people who were most alone. These people have been shown by many to have very few friends.²⁵ Anonymity and isolation are instead the rule.

Langner and Michael studied the incidence of mental disorders on Manhattan Island in New York City.²⁶ They found that people who reported having fewer than four friends had a significantly higher chance of mental disorder than those who reported having more than four friends. People who appeared to have the fewest number of friends had the greatest likelihood of mental illness.

²⁴R. E. L. Faris and H. W. Dunham, Mental Disorders in Urban Areas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), pp. 82-109.

²⁵Ibid., p. 7.

²⁶T. S. Langner and S. T. Michael, Life Stress and Mental Health (New York: 1963).

Herman Lantz did research on a group of 1,000 men in the United States Air Force.²⁷ The men had been referred to a mental hygiene clinic because of emotional difficulties. He found that the men who reported having the fewest number of friends were those that were diagnosed as mentally ill. Those that reported having many friends were diagnosed as being normal.

D. M. Fanning studied the health of the wives of British armed forces personnel stationed in Germany in the late 1960's.²⁸ He found the frequency of neurosis in the women to vary directly with the level that their apartment unit was located on. The higher the level the greater the frequency of neurosis (neurosis is a psychological disturbance characterized by prolonged high levels of anxiety which reduces a person's efficiency in dealing with reality). Fanning attributed his results to the fact that the social isolation of the women increased with height.²⁹ The higher the level the women lived in the greater their isolation from people, the fewer the friendships, and therefore the greater the incidence of neurosis. The fact that Fanning found a low level of neurosis in women who worked and could get out and have contact with many people served to further strengthen his argument.

²⁷Lantz, pp. 107-108.

²⁸D. M. Fanning, "Families in Flats," British Medical Journal, 4, (October-December, 1967), pp. 382-386.

²⁹Ibid., p. 383.

There exists a correlation between low socio-economic status and high rates of mental disorder and delinquency.³⁰ Langner and Michael have found that people in the lower socio-economic groups tend to have fewer friends than the people in the highest socio-economic groups.³¹ A connection between the above factors cannot be ruled out.

The evidence does seem to indicate that there is a relationship between the extreme lack of meaningful contact and the extreme forms of alienation.

Alienation has been said to be due to the lack of meaningful social contact between people, and evidence has been presented which lends credibility to this hypothesis. The question which inevitably follows is, why do people lack meaningful social contact?

Primary Group Relations

Lack of meaningful social contact can be attributed to the breakdown in primary group relations in North American society.

A primary group can be defined as "a small group of people characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation."³² It is primary in the sense that it is fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual.

³⁰Arnold M. Rose and Holger, R. Stub, "Summary of Studies on the Incidence of Mental Disorders." ed. Arnold M. Rose, Mental Health and Mental Disorder. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1955, pp. 102-104.

³¹Langner and Michael, p. 286.

³²Charles H. Cooley, Social Organization (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 23.

Primary groups have been the mechanism by which meaningful contacts have been encouraged in the past. In recent times, however, their effectiveness in this role has been declining. The two most important primary groups are the family and the children's play group. The waning influence of the primary groups can be emphasized by taking a closer look at these two groups.

The Family: Today's family still serves as a mechanism which facilitates and maintains meaningful social contact among its members. Its impact, however, on an individual member's overall number of meaningful contacts has been much reduced. The average modern family contains four members, two of which are adults. As a result, the average family is likely only able to provide one meaningful contact for each of the parents and one for each of the children. By virtue of the definition of meaningful social contact, meaningful contact between children and adults is not possible. There is no mutual revealing of the self between children and adults. Children are likely to be open with adults and eager to talk about many of their concerns but the process is not likely to work in the other direction. Children, because of their age and maturational levels, are not usually taken into confidence by adults. Therefore, the number of meaningful contacts which are to be found in the nuclear family can be said to be correct as presented above. The extended family of previous years on the other hand contained many adults and many children. A number of meaningful contacts could be present under one roof.

There is evidence that many households do not even contain two adults but only one.³³ Many people are either single, widowed, divorced, or separated. It is likely that under these circumstances these people would not have one meaningful contact as home.

The Children's Playgroup: The United States and Canada have recently reached zero population growth. People in North America over the years have been having fewer children. The average number per family is now somewhere in the neighbourhood of 2.3.^{34,35} This reduced number of children has been causing problems for the children's playgroup.

In the past, when families were larger, there was a greater number of children in any given area. Children had easy access to many other children of similar age. Playgroups, as a result, tended to be large and these playgroups could encourage a large number of meaningful social contacts. Today, children of similar age are not as easily accessible to each other as they once were. The playgroups tend to be smaller and it follows that they encourage fewer meaningful contacts.

The impact of both the family and the children's playgroups with respect to number of meaningful social contacts has been much reduced. There is evidence that the influence of lesser primary

³³Ruth Glass and F. G. Davidson, "Household Structure and Housing Needs," Population Studies, 4 (1951), pp. 403-404.

³⁴Canada Year Book 1974 (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1974), p. 148.

³⁵The New York Times Encyclopedic Almanac 1972. (New York: The New York Times Company, 1971), p. 483.

groups has also declined.³⁶ What is the reason for the breakdown of primary group relations and the resulting consequences?

Individual Autonomy

The breakdown in primary group relations is the result of the growth of individual autonomy in North American society. People, because of the available wealth, are able to provide for their own material needs. Women can work and support themselves (many women even support families). Teenagers, as young as sixteen years, can work and make their own living. Senior citizens, because they receive a pension from the Government and other sources, do not have to rely on kin to see them through their old age. People have become autonomous. This was not the case in previous years. People were not able to live as easily on their own as they do now.

People have recognized the fact that they have the ability to provide for their own needs and this has given them a feeling of independence. Primary relations as a result have not been given the same prominence as before because they have been perceived as not being as necessary for survival purposes. From a material point of view this is certainly true. Primary relations, because they have not been given as much attention as before, have tended to break down.

Industrialization

Industrialization has been the factor which has influenced the growth of individual autonomy. Industrialization has resulted

³⁶Alexander, p. 74.