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## IDEAS

### Physical Determinism, Modernism and Mental Health

Don Alexander

#### Abstract

Does the physical/built environment have an impact on our mental and physical well-being? Over time, various doctrines – and countering reactions – have provided different answers to this question. This paper notes the broad sweep of responses, pointing out their planning/development and, subsequently, health implications. The current revival of emphasis on 'place' as well as emerging understandings of our individual connections and dependencies with our environments are also discussed. This leads to the conclusion that while we must guard against physical determinism of various kinds, we must also recognize the influence our environments have on our very state of being, including our physical and mental health.

The IDEAS section is intended to air work in progress, debate controversial themes, voice interpretations and discuss different scholarly and civic points of view. The intent is to provide a forum for material that is interesting and evocative but which may not find a voice in a strictly academic format.

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L'environnement physique ou bâti a-t-il des répercussions sur notre bien-être physique et mental? Au fil du temps, diverses doctrines – et les réactions adverses qu'elles entraînent – ont fourni différentes réponses à cette question. L'auteur de cet article brosse un tableau de l'éventail des réponses, soulignant leurs conséquences en matière de planification et de développement et, subséquemment, en matière de santé. Il examine également la résurgence actuelle de l'attention que l'on accorde au « lieu », ainsi que les nouvelles compréhensions de nos liens et de notre interdépendance avec notre environnement. Cela mène à la conclusion que bien que nous devions nous protéger des déterminismes physiques de toutes sortes, nous devons également reconnaître l'influence que notre environnement peut avoir sur notre état général, notamment notre santé physique et notre santé mentale.

## Keywords

Mental health, physical determinism, built environment, well-being, place

## Introduction

Does the physical/built environment have an impact on our mental and physical well-being? In the past commentators have tended to put too much emphasis on this – or too little. It was fashionable in geography in the latter part of the nineteenth century to believe that climate was a principal determinant of culture. It was thought that northern European cultures were more 'dynamic' and 'resourceful' because of the rigours of living in the north. Conversely, cultures in the tropics – where the living was 'easy' and where heat was thought to induce lethargy – were seen as tending towards torpor and underdevelopment (Frenkel 1992, Gallagher 1993).

Another version of the doctrine – propounded by socialists like Robert Owen and various social reformers, such as planning forerunner Ebenezer Howard – suggested that the crowding, unsanitary conditions and absence of fresh air and greenery in European and North American cities of the time were responsible for unstable families and widespread drunkenness and debauchery (Hubbard 1909, Goodman 1971, Boyer 1986, Lippard 1997, Knack 1998). Create new physical conditions and one would create new human beings. Clearly, these doctrines – where not obviously racist or classist – were overly simplified and reductionist.

However, in reaction to these mistaken ideas, another extreme view took hold. This was the modernist view that humans are infinitely malleable, and that the physical environment, apart from the provision of adequate shelter and employment, hardly matters at all (Vance 1990). While not always articulated clearly, it can be argued that this doctrine implicitly and explicitly lurks behind the building of massive blocks of high-rise apartments on both sides of the Cold War divide. As long as people were doing their virtuous duty as socialist producers or capitalist consumers, it was held to be a matter of indifference if they were living in bland, cookie-cutter slab apartment buildings or suburban tracts, and had to negotiate sterile industrial zones or ribbon-style commercial strip developments as their daily habitat.<sup>1</sup> The indifferent design of work places and hospital environments helps complete the picture.<sup>2</sup>

One key aspect of the reductionism that has characterized modernist planning and design, at least in North America, is the tendency to see people as atomized egos, as isolated monads. This view goes hand-in-hand with the popular economic notion of "*homo economicus*" – that people are principally consumers seeking to increase the utility of purchases and to maximize the benefit of various economic transactions.

<sup>1</sup> According to Weich, *et al.* (2002), higher rates of depression amongst residents are found in environments characterized by graffiti, blank open spaces, 'deck access' entryways to dwellings, and few private gardens. For an overview of the literature on physical, mental, and emotional well-being and its relationship to the built environment, see Butterworth (2000).

<sup>2</sup> This indifference to the quality of built environment has reflected and reinforced what Michael Benedikt (2002: 21) has called "environmental stoicism and place machismo."

A contrary perspective suggests that the self is a field, a web of relationships and connections with the larger physical and social world (Cantrill and Senecah 2000). The larger self encompasses all that people love. If people do not feel connected to their environment, be it natural or built, then they will not “take care” of it, it will not be worth defending. To inspire this care, places must – according to Kunstler – possess charm:

*The word charm may seem fussy, trivial, vague. I use it to mean explicitly that which makes our physical surroundings worth caring about. It is not a trivial matter, for we are presently suffering on a massive scale the social consequences of living in places that are not worth caring about. Charm is dependent on connectedness, on continuities, on the relation between private space and public space, or the sacred and the workaday, or the interplay of space... Kunstler (1993: 168).*

When the places and things we love are damaged, then we too are damaged. In essence, we depend on our environment, in part, for the raw materials out of which we construct a durable sense of self. If our environment is limited in terms of what it is capable of mirroring back, then we too are limited in our growth and development, not to mention impacted in terms of our mental and physical health.

A related point is that research suggests that people can only adopt new roles and behaviours to the extent that spaces or settings are created that facilitate these new roles and behaviours (Fitzpatrick and LaGory 2000). If we want to nurture the emergence of *homo sustinens* (the sustainable human), rather than *homo economicus*, then we need to create the spaces for him or her to flourish (Siebenhüner 2000).

Fortunately, the last thirty-odd years have seen a revival of interest relating to the concept of place (including the built environment), and its relevance to mental health and other fields of study. The concept of place or human habitat is providing the basis for interdisciplinary research through organizations such as the Environmental Design Research Association, and is beginning to influence professional practice in a variety of areas that affect the quality of our immediate environments.

In the past, under the influence of modernism, hospitals were built that were little more than warehouses for the sick – strictly functional places for the practice of the medical arts, usually conceived of in the most reductionist sense possible. It is only in recent decades that people have begun to consider the significance of good design for the healing process (World Health Design 2008). It is now known that hospital patients recuperate faster and experience less pain when presented with leafy vistas and access to more natural spaces and natural light (Johnson 2007). It is also known that the productivity of workers increases significantly with access to natural light and materials<sup>3</sup>, and that ADD in children and family violence go down in greener neighbourhoods (Kaplan 1995, Kuo and

<sup>3</sup> For a relevant case study, see the profile of the Herman Miller office furniture plant in Michigan in *The Next Industrial Revolution* (Bedford and Morhaim 2001).

Sullivan 2001, Kaplan 2002).

Moreover, authors such as Evans and McCoy (1998) have focused on the role of interior design in contributing to our sense of well-being or eroding it through adding stress. In their seminal article, "When Buildings Don't Work," they talk about five key elements of design – levels of stimulation, coherence, affordances (user-friendliness), degrees of control, and the ability to be restorative. Modernist architecture and design have often scored poorly in their handling of these elements. All of these examples reflect the fact that, in addition to having mouths and hands or brains, we are also spiritual beings, for whom aesthetics, and sensory and symbolic stimulation, matter.

In this we are certainly affected by individual buildings, but we are also affected by the larger communities of which we are a part. All communities undergo change. However, if the pace of change is too rapid, undermining the familiarity of local landscapes, then it can induce a sense of apathy and helplessness, as people begin to lose the feeling of being able to influence the forces that shape their daily lives on a neighbourhood or municipal level. Loss of treasured environments can even trigger grief as intense as that of losing a family member or other loved one (Manzo et al. 2008, Fried 1963), and when people are uprooted from familiar, supportive environments through processes of urban 'renewal,' it has been compared to the phenomenon of 'root shock' in plants and can have effects that last for decades (Fullilove 2004).

The project of displacing poor people (often people of colour) from inner-city neighbourhoods that were usually rich in a variety of land uses, cultural elements and social capital, and concentrating them in monolithic housing blocks reflected the dominant ethos of modernism at the time. Eugene Walter sees in the contrast between the place-insensitive modernist position dominant in city-building professions in the past, and a place-appreciative perspective, a conflict between "Platonic" and "Aristotelian" concepts:

*The Aristotelian believes "place" is a neutral container into which you move all the independent contents of your experience. The grounded Platonist understands that "place" is an active receptacle of shapes, powers, and feelings that energizes and nourishes its contents (Walter 1988: 12).*

In conclusion, while guarding against the dangers of physical determinism of various kinds, we should heed the observation of Edward Relph (1987: preface) that "the landscapes and places we live in are important. Whether we shape them or they shape us, they are the expressions of what we are like. Our lives are impoverished precisely to the extent that we ignore them."

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