

DESIGN AS A NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE

By Dolores Norley

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PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON MENTAL RETARDATION
Washington, D.C. 20201

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Communication is not all verbal or written. Body language is not just movement or stance. It is dress and distance. Territoriality demands or sanctions of an environment are components of another language, and the decoding of the message is not dependent on the intelligence of the receiver.

There is different residential behavior understood when walking down the halls of Leavenworth or the Ritz. Living design literally shouts messages of expectation to the resident.

Clerestory windows say we expect you to break glass and besides, your seeing outside is unimportant. They also say that society does not want to look at you.

Six, 10, 20 or 60 beds in one room say you are not an individual. You exist only as part of a group.

Benches or rows of chairs in front of a television set say you are boobish and do not need and will not get a cultural/social life.

Toilets without doors say you are incapable of learning self-care.

Tiled walls say there is more interest in sanitation than in your sanity.

Baths and showers with no privacy say you have no right to dignity.

Carpetless floors say we expect you to soil them and you are not worthy of training.

Eating facilities separate from staff and visitors say you are infra-human and not worthy of cross-sectional companionship.

Limited use or locked doors say society must be protected from you and you from yourself.

Employees are hung with keys to maintain this protective design. They say you have no right to make errors, though error upon error is the normal way we all learn.

Every developed country is in the swing of phasing out traditional institutions in favor of small community residences in normal neighborhoods. Almost all states

Mrs. Norley, who recently received an award from the Florida Rehabilitation Association for "her effective and outstanding services for the mentally retarded during the past 20 years," is a special adviser to the President's Commission on Mental Retardation.

"Some thirty inches from my nose
The frontier of my Person goes,
And all that untilled air between
Is private pagus or demesne
Stranger, unless with bedroom eyes
I beckon you to fraternize
Beware of rudely crossing it:
I have no gun, but I can spit."

W. H. Auden

"Prologue: The Birth of Architecture,"
About the House, N.Y., Random
House, 1965

are far along in plans and at the beginning of implementation.

Yet the March '72 issue of *Architectural Forum* features a new Bronx State School for the Retarded, with an "introverted focus." The drawings show a multi-winged, four-story squarish white structure with blank faces "isolated from the wasteland of blight around it." The density is not mentioned, but an educated guess is that it's more on warehouse than domestic proportions.

And Illinois announces with pride the building of a series of centers, each with 400 beds. Incredible!

The tunnel vision areas still pop up.

No wonder Bengt Nirje, then Secretary General of the Swedish Association for Retarded Children, said that he "found it difficult to understand how a society which is built on such noble principles, and which has the resources to make these principles a reality, can and will tolerate the dehumanization of a large number of its citizens in a fashion somewhat remindful of Nazi concentration camps."

He took exception to the word "purgatory" as used in the book by Burtan Blatt and Fred Kaplan, *Christmas in Purgatory* (Rockleigh, N.J.: Allyn & Bacon, 1967). He said that what he saw was Gehenna, or Hell.

Building codes and regulatory agencies are the whipping boys, or excuses for un-human planning. But such blame is a cop-out. The codes are man-made, and man can change them by a feisty combination of you and us. We are skilled in changing laws and regulations. We who are political change-agent advocates, who have no personal-gain axes to grind, who must speak twice as loudly because we speak for those who cannot speak for themselves, who have experience and know-how in haunching a phalanx of coalesced power to gain or defeat what we will, we need your specialized knowledge in a combined thrust to obtain reasonable codes. We can threaten, cajole, scream and cry, while you preserve your decorum and provide scientific documentation. That's a combination which strikes terror in the heart of any bureaucrat.

We have built our personal and cor-



porate lobbying powers to the point of practical influence on all programs and especially on their funding. Appropriations in all but a few states are no longer practicably available for traditional institutions.

And your influence is greater than you think. You make policy, even governmental policy, by your very approach to the problem.

Architects have said over and over that they are the prisoners of their clients, private and governmental. Maybe so. But they needn't be. One suspects that when they are, it is because they are ineffectual, lazy or uninformed.

Architects and funeral directors have the same impact on most of us. They are necessary, expensive and they intimidate us with their esoteric knowhow. We deal with each of them at highly traumatic moments in our lives, when we are least able to think for ourselves. We are not always honest and fair with them in our awe and timidity, for we don't insist on our special needs. We hand over the whole job and then complain later—to everyone else.

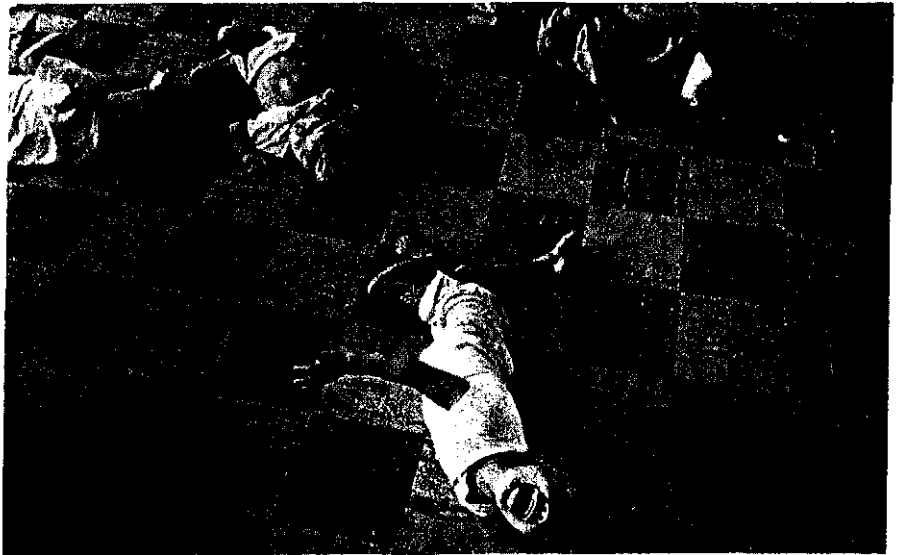
There is another similarity: Given a certain assignment and cost allowed, morticians and architects (at least when planning for the retarded resident) give us minor variations of the same old box!

Let's say you're asked to design a residential facility for the retarded. Do you think of a house on an ordinary street? Do you envision bedrooms for one or two people? Do you see a family? Do you see a need for privacy and the storage of personal possessions within reach? Do you see bathrooms of the same type and number you'd plan for a large family?

If your clients don't see these needs, do you make an effort to educate them?

The day of the concern or protective model is gone. If it weren't, I should have a stove which cuts off above "low" because I tend to cook quickly while doing other things and I burn food often and sometimes set the kitchen afire. But that's my right, to learn by error, and I *am* doing better. No one agonizes over my disability—and I'd resent it if they did.

Some men and women should sit on Formica, sleep on metal and walk on con-



crete, for their smoking habits are dangerous to chairs, beds, carpeting and other people. Who would try to "protect" them by designing a "safe" environment for them?

Yet we accept extraordinarily sterile environments for retarded people, environments which tell them clearly what horrors we expect of them, denying them the dignity of risk and learning how to handle it.

If you build zoos, or warehouses, the message of the design will be self-fulfilling; the residents will behave as animals or zombies. What's more, the staff, by the same insidious osmosis, will gear their own behaviour and expectations to the language of the environment.

Kenneth Bayes of England spoke of people architecture and its admission that each human has a need for self-esteem and self-fulfillment. Planning must be for the maximum potential of the resident, not for the convenience of the staff.

The famous anthropologist Edward Hall, in discussing man's need for space, said: "Caged animals become stupid, which is a very heavy price to pay for a super filing system! How far can we afford to travel down the road of sensory deprivation in order to file people away?"

One of the classic problems in communication is frozen evaluation, i.e., it is assumed that a person is nonchanging.



The retarded do change; therefore, living quarters must not petrify potential. Upward mobility must be built into that self-filling prophecy. Let the design speak.

Normal expectations beget normal behavior. Hear us clearly, give the retarded people a home, the same kind of home you want for yourself. If you'd like to live there, so would they. •