It is good that one’s deeds should exceed one’s understanding, for the deeds will inspire one to learn the meaning of what one has been doing.

—Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah

It was my good fortune to come to Milwaukee in the autumn of 1983 after eight years of teaching at two universities—one quite large, in a middle Atlantic state, the other smaller and very much of the Great Plains. Let’s discreetly call them Universities X and Y. While the programs at X and Y differed in many ways, both began with a commitment to an interdisciplinary environmental design curriculum staffed by an interdisciplinary faculty. Thus I taught with colleagues whose backgrounds were in psychology and planning, architecture and sociology, landscape, interior and graphic design. Despite their earnest intentions neither program succeeded or survived. The reasons for their shared fate were undoubtedly complex and multiple: decline in the economy, diminished societal interest in the 1980’s in innovative interdisciplinary programs, conflicting claims on the same academic territory. In short, I came to Milwaukee with some concern that the School of Architecture & Urban Planning, with its new Ph.D. program focused on environment-behavior studies (EBS), might be at risk. I surely didn’t want UWM to be my University Z.
I needn’t have worried. Upon arrival I found myself almost immediately immersed in an active and congenial academic environment. SARUP was at least as multidisciplinary as the programs at Universities X and Y. Indeed many faculty members were of what one might call “mixed lineage”—anthropology and architecture, architecture and psychology, psychology and geography. Our focus, however, wasn’t on discipline but on the problem at hand, and the multiple perspectives from which it might be approached. With the benefit of hindsight I can now see that my colleagues at neither X nor Y never coalesced into an effective working group. We each employed different conceptual frameworks, different vocabularies, and fundamentally different views of our world. Translation, let alone integration of these multiple worldviews, was clearly no simple task. At University X, I was viewed as the social scientist among the designers and at University as the designer among the social scientists. At UWM it has never been an issue. In short, Milwaukee has not been University Z.

Now, almost three decades later, what lessons have been learned? To confront the Rabbi’s question, is there meaning to what we have been doing? In just a few pages a dozen colleagues, faculty and graduates will have more to say about their life and times in Milwaukee. For the moment let me quickly sketch out some of what I’ve done and hopefully learned:

Problems and personalities. The mix of backgrounds and personalities of the individuals who constitute any program or project in a fundamentally cross-disciplinary field such as EBS matters more than we might think. Allegiance should be to the collective program/project, not just one’s own field.

The Avis paradigm. Milwaukee is a rich and diverse city and UW-Milwaukee is an excellent urban university. And while it doesn’t have the academic resources of a Madison or an Ann Arbor, there is a long history of town and gown cooperation. Thus the Milwaukee School “tries harder” by providing students unique opportunities to engage with faculty in research, consulting and service projects, and unparalleled access to city agencies and foundations.

Under/over staffing. Gump and Barker had it right. Size does matter and under and over staffing are real. When students and faculty teach and conduct research with a range of faculty, type casting becomes more difficult.
Three degrees of separation? Who could imagine that lunch with a former UW-Milwaukee Visiting Scholar in the delightful medieval university town of Tubing would provide the opportunity to meet a German ecological psychologist who was able to provide a link to an American ecological psychologist—then teaching in Kazakhstan—who could provide an introduction to the concepts of pragmatic psychology, which have contributed significantly to a problem oriented approach to EBS. In short, location has less and less impact on building a network of colleagues.

Design-based evidence. It is fascinating to watch the current courtship between EBS and EBD (evidence-based design). Can these two paradigms compliment one another? Are the strictures of random assignment and double blind trials compatible with problem based case studies focused on what does, and what doesn’t work?

So, we are shaped by our times, and our location as well. While the beginnings of EBS were in large part on the coasts (East and West) it seems fitting that a good bit of its development took place on the “third coast” at UWM.

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Gerald Weisman