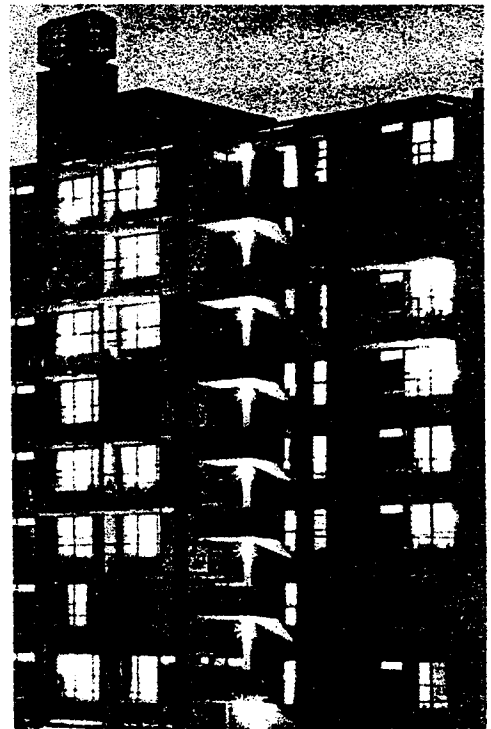


**Introduction**



## INTRODUCTION

Arza Churchman

### *LEARNING FROM HISTORY*

From its inception, the field of Environment-Behavior Studies has been a future-focused field. It asked how we could change the world to make it a better place; it was in some ways a utopian world view (Schneekloth, 1994). As such, there has been a tendency to neglect the past, forgetting that even a young field has a history, and that much can be learned from history. Furthermore, only recently have we begun to move from an ahistorical approach, to one which recognizes the importance of the cultural, political, economic, technological, temporal context of the phenomena studied in the past and those being studied in the present (Altman & Rogoff, 1987).

### *THE VICTORIA PLAZA STUDY*

This monograph focuses on one study from the very early beginnings of the Environment-Behavior field, one unique then and unique even now in many of its aspects: Frances Carp's longitudinal study of Victoria Plaza, that tested the effects of living in new and better housing on the health and well being of the elderly residents, over the course of nine years.

San Antonio is the home of Victoria Plaza, the first public housing facility specifically designed for and limited to older persons. The approach was innovative too in that the building was designed with facilities for a range of medical and social services on the ground floor. Today the notion of age-specific residential or whole communities and the combination of housing

and services is quite common, but in the late 1950's it was much less common, and unheard of in public housing. Victoria Plaza was an unusual and pioneering situation in another sense. Thanks to the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health at the University of Texas, behavioral scientists were recruited and funds provided for a pre-post study of the applicants for residence and their evaluations of the housing.

***REVISITING VICTORIA  
PLAZA***

The convening of the 25th Annual Meeting of the Environmental Design Research Association in San Antonio in March of 1994, offered the opportunity to use the occasion to mark the significance of the Victoria Plaza study and to reflect on the substantive and methodological lessons that can be learned from it.

The Institute on Aging and Environment of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee sponsored the conference session at which Frances Carp presented a paper, an expanded version of which appears in this monograph. The comments of the two discussants at the session, Min Kantrowitz and Gerald Weisman, both with much experience in the fields of post occupancy evaluation and design for the elderly, follow her paper. We also include material on the physical design of the building and on the original intentions of the San Antonio Housing Authority.

***LESSONS FOR THE FIELD  
OF AGING AND  
ENVIRONMENT***

Our knowledge about the elderly and about their housing needs is much greater today than it was in the 1950's, as evidenced by the many books and publications that have appeared since, particularly within the last ten years (Altman, Lawton & Wohlwill,

1984; Carstens, 1985; Newcomer, Lawton & Byerts, 1986; Carp, 1987; Regnier & Pynoos, 1987; Blank, 1988; Cohen & Weisman 1991; Heumann & Boldy, 1993, representing only a partial list). It seems incredible now to read in Carp's paper, that the attitude then was that the elderly could not adapt to new things and to new environments. This sounds especially strange to us today, since the age considered 'old' then, would now be considered 'young elderly', to say the least.

However, lest we be too complacent, it should be noted that misconceptions about the elderly still exist, among professionals as well as among the public. For example, a number of people working in the area of geriatric rehabilitation argue that much ageism exists in the field of rehabilitation (Becker & Kaufman, 1988; Olson, 1986). The restoration of normal function and return to self-sufficiency, which is one definition of rehabilitation, is thought to be unlikely among elderly persons, and failure to return to function is considered to be acceptable for the elderly. This misconception is unfortunately held also by many of the elderly themselves; whereas, in fact, early rehabilitation intervention is considered to be more important for the elderly than for younger patients (Clark & Siebens, 1993), and rehabilitation can maintain the independence of older people in the community (Kemp, Brummel-Smith & Plowman, 1989)

The lesson to be taken to heart is that we must be cautious in our assumptions about the elderly or any group of people, and be sure to make those assumptions explicit and, where possible,

formulate them as hypotheses to be tested.

The fortuitous combination, at a particular point in time, of an enlightened housing authority, an enlightened foundation and a creative researcher, all willing to break new ground and take risks, resulted in a special place and a special study. We hope that this monograph will serve to remind us of the lessons to be learned from that.

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