

**Time, Age, Research: Comments on  
Frances M. Carp's  
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**Min Kantrowitz**

Frances Carp's retrospective paper on the post occupancy evaluation of Victoria Plaza housing for the elderly is a delightful illustration of the peculiar relationships between time and built environment research. As the first post occupancy evaluation of the government sponsored housing for the elderly in the United States, the questions it raises are timeless, that is they are still, after 35 years, timely. Ironically, many of the conclusions reached by that research are also timeless, but are still, apparently, outside the consciousness of many housing decision makers.

One important conclusion, which has been replicated on multiple occasions, is that the physical environment makes a systematic and measurable difference in the lives of people. Her mildly stated conclusion, "Characteristics of the living environment do matter to older persons." (Carp, p. 19), is based on the most robust of indicators - being alive. In fact, at the presentations at the Environmental Design Research Association Conference in March 1994, workshop participants were told that some of the original inhabitants who moved into the Victoria Plaza in 1959 are still alive! For some, their residency at Victoria Plaza may be their longest tenancy. Given this impressive longevity, the assumption that housing for elderly people is a sort of temporary shelter is

demonstrably false. There are, of course, design implications to this fact.

Carp's serendipitous finding, that the same people rated their present housing lower after finding out they had been selected to move into Victoria Plaza, is interesting. It is an excellent example of how time and changed status affect how people judge the built environment, and of how the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) operates to influence perception of the physical environment. Perhaps it should be included in introductory design and behavior textbooks.

This research is still one of the few examples of longitudinal research in the environment-behavior literature. It tells decisionmakers that the implications of certain design decisions maintain their importance for residents over many years. These include some design issues which were initially identified by some people during their pre-move visit. Given this, perhaps a "psychological amortization" of design decisions should be considered, as well as the usual financial one. This might be the vehicle through which to implement the model apartments' pre-evaluation that Carp suggests.

The paper refers to the assumption implicit in the concept of housing for the elderly "— that older people CAN adjust to new and better housing" (Carp, p. 7). This assumption, although it is positive in comparison to the supposition that older people are too rigid to cope with environmental change, ignores the possibility

that the process of adjustment is not just simple adaptation, but opens possibilities for positive growth and change, that “eldering” is process of unfolding, an *active* life stage.

After this period of time, it is useful to reflect on the fact that the focus of public interest, and the funding that often follows that focus, seems to wander over the stages of life. Carp discusses how adolescence was the “hot topic” in the early 50’s. Since then, public attention has turned to the elderly, pre-school children, to “at-risk” teenagers, and back to the elderly. While this seems, from a casual view, to be rather random and arbitrary, in fact, it may be quite intentional, an effective promotion of an issue. Communications research has developed the concept of “agenda setting”, the process by which certain issues are promoted into the public eye, with certain issues gaining perceived importance while others fade. Agenda setting for age related public policy issues related to age and stage of life have been studied for many years (Lockett, 1983; Nelson, 1984). Carp’s paper points out the timelessness of certain issues pertaining to how to provide housing for older adults. Perhaps some explicit “agenda setting” can return these timeless issues into the larger public eye.

- REFERENCES** Festinger, L.(1962). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lockett, B. (1983) *Aging, politics and research: Setting the Federal agenda for research on aging*. New York: Springer.

Nelson, B. (1984). *Making an issue of child abuse: Political agenda setting for social problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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