

Learning from Victoria Plaza



LEARNING FROM VICTORIA PLAZA

Gerald D. Weisman

Frances Carp's history of the earliest days of Victoria Plaza is both remarkable and instructive. The evaluation study conducted by Carp and her colleagues fully 35 years ago can still serve as a model for meaningful environmental design research. Four aspects of the Victoria Plaza project seem particularly worthy of comment: the role of time; prescience with regard to issues and methods; rigor of the study; and inter-disciplinary communication and collaboration.

TIME It has been suggested that time is a dimension of the environment all too often neglected in Environment-Behavior research (c.f., Altman & Rogoff, 1987). Time emerges — in many different ways — as a dominant theme in the evaluation of Victoria Plaza. The project was initiated at a time when environmental design research had yet to coalesce as a field, a full decade prior to the earliest texts and journals. The study is particularly noteworthy for its duration. Even now — at a time when longitudinal studies are more often a goal than the norm — the ability of Carp and her colleagues to gather data not just one but nine years after move-in is a remarkable achievement.

PRESCIENCE Both the San Antonio Housing Authority and the Hogg Foundation which funded the research, were clearly forward-thinking in recognizing the value of evaluation of a then novel form of housing for older persons. The Authority and their architects likewise

anticipated a variety of design features — such as accessible units, and lever action door handles — which we now take for granted. The provision of tours for potential in-movers was particularly innovative, and anticipated current strategies for mitigating the morbidity and mortality sometimes associated with relocation of the elderly (c.f., Hunt & Pastalan, 1987).

RIGOR The Victoria Plaza evaluation likewise provides a model we would do well to emulate in terms of the rigor with which it was designed and conducted. The longitudinal nature of the study — gathering data prior to move-in and then one and nine years later — has already been noted. Equally impressive is the presence of a matched group of “controls” who chose not to move into Victoria Plaza, and the use of both “soft” and “hard” outcome measures — mortality as well as multiple dimensions of satisfaction.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONTACT Finally, it is instructive, though not necessarily encouraging, to note that more than 20 years have elapsed since Frances Carp’s last presentation at an EDRA conference, despite the fact that much of her work in the intervening years — especially that on “technical environmental assessment predictors” (Carp & Christensen, 1986) — has direct relevance for environmental design research. Indeed, in surveying the field of environment-aging studies more generally, one quickly discovers any number of researchers and areas of research which could and should contribute to environmental design research but remain all too unfamiliar. Along with the work of Frances Carp and her colleagues, one might cite Rowles’ (1980) framework for place experience, Rubinstein & Parmalee’s (1992) research on place attachment,

and work by Moos (Moos, Lemke & David, 1987), Sloane (Sloane & Mathew, 1990) and their colleagues on environmental assessment and description (c.f., Weisman, 1992). Like the pioneering evaluation of Victoria Plaza, this larger literature illustrates both the fundamental interdisciplinary commitment of environmental design research and its potential for productivity.

REFERENCES

- Altman, I. & Rogoff, B. (1987). World views in psychology: Trait, interactional, organismic and transactional. In D. Stokols & I. Altman (Eds.), *Handbook of environmental psychology*. New York: Wiley Interscience.
- Carp, F. (1987). The impact of planned housing: A longitudinal study. In V. Regnier & J. Pynoos (Eds.), *Housing the aged: Design directives and policy considerations*. New York: Elsevier.
- Carp, F. & Christensen, D. (1986). Technical environmental assessment predictors of residential satisfaction: A study of elderly women living alone. *Research on Aging*, 8, 269-287.
- Hunt, M. & Pastalan, L. (1987). Easing relocation: An environmental learning process. In V. Regnier & J. Pynoos (Eds.), *Housing the aged: Design directives and policy considerations*. New York: Elsevier.

Moos, R., Lemke, S., & David, T. (1987). Priorities for design and management in residential settings for the elderly. In V. Regnier & J. Pynoos (Eds.), *Housing the aged: Design directives and policy considerations*. New York: Elsevier.

Rowles, G. (1980). Toward a geography of growing old. In A. Buttimer & D. Seamon (Eds.), *The human experience of place and space*. London: Croon Helm.

Rubinstein, R. & Parmalee, P. (1992). Attachment to place and the representation of the life course by the elderly. In I. Altman & S. Low (Eds.), *Place attachment*. New York: Plenum.

Sloane, P. & Mathew, L. (1990). The therapeutic environment screening scale. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Care and Research*, 5, 22-26.

Weisman, G. (1992). Research in aging and environmental design: Past, present, future? In E. Arias & M. Gross (Eds.), *Equitable and sustainable habitats: Proceedings of the 23rd Annual Conference of the Environmental Design Research Association*. Oklahoma City, OK: EDRA.

Gerald Weisman, Ph.D. Institute on Aging and Environment, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.