

Book Review

What Americans Build and Why: Psychological Perspectives

Ann Sloan Devlin
Cambridge University Press, 2010

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ONE OF THE JOYS of being a geographer is discovering how far and wide the discipline's impact is felt outside its *nidus* in the musty Atlas rooms (or sparkling GIS labs, take your pick) of university geography departments. Most gratifyingly, for example, we may discover it in former students who leave academia but maintain a quiet passion for the subject their entire lives. Occasionally, too, however, comes something of a rebuttal—a reminder that not all of geography's contributions to knowledge and worldview are ones its practitioners may respond to with a swelling of vicarious parental pride.

One such rebuttal was contained for me in Ann Sloan Devlin's *What Americans Build and Why*, an informative and genuinely interesting examination of the built environment from a psychological perspective. The rebuttal occurred in a chapter on workplaces, wherein Devlin describes the impressive amount of psychological research conducted by the Herman Miller Company, an office furniture manufacturer. According to Devlin, the company Web site cites the work of geographer Jay Appleton (well known for his "prospect and refuge" theory) to make the case for the open office filled with cubicles. In the company's version of this plan, apparently, a fabric canopy simulates treetops while open areas surrounding walkways offer "vistas" (183). At a basic level of their brains, office workers are happily roaming the savannas in which they evolved. While this may seem intuitively credible to some (including Devlin), and is indirectly supported by evidence that workers with a view (especially of nature) tend to have higher productivity, the revelation was for me—someone who has left his share of footprints in an office-savanna—an occasion for a *mea culpa*. If

only inadvertently, my discipline has helped consign thousands to a fate of cubicle-dwelling apethood.

If recollecting my cubicle days has stirred up un-fond feelings, then the larger point here testifies to the significance of Devlin's theme: places have powerful emotional and psychological effects on their users. Geographers already know this, but aside from the relative few who specialize in psychological theory, we know it essentially as amateurs. Devlin, a psychology professor at Connecticut College, offers the voice of an expert. This gives her analysis of the psychological dimensions of the American built environment an air of authority that is sometimes missing from geographers' work. In addition to workplaces, the book has chapters on suburbs, hospitals, schools, and retail outlets.

Devlin presents relatively little original research. Instead, she offers critical literature reviews of each topic. (About that cubicle plan: Devlin winds up criticizing Herman Miller's justification for it after all. The company contends that knowledge workers spend seventy percent of their time on collaborative work—something the barrier-free cubicle farm facilitates. But Devlin cites research from BOSTI (the Buffalo Organization for Social and Technical Innovation, which Devlin greatly respects) showing that even team-oriented software workers spend up to two-thirds of their time working alone. The open layout of the cubicle farm facilitates teamwork but also means that workers constantly deal with visual and auditory distractions. Thus, Devlin concludes, the Herman Miller Web site "is obviously building a case for its products" (184).

Throughout the book, Devlin stresses two themes: the need for scientific research on facility design (i.e., based on random samples and controlled experiments, rather than self-reported information collected on surveys), and a wariness of architectural determinism. The need for scientific research is arguably most acute in the health care industry, where design variables such as hospital layouts and numbers of patients per room can influence patients' moods, sense of privacy, and ability to rest, all of which in turn bear upon rates of recovery (and costs). However, Devlin reports, researchers often face difficulty in receiving permission from Institutional Review Boards that protect human subjects, limiting scientific research on these issues. Thus some interesting innovations in medical facility design seem, based on Devlin's presentation, to have been inspired by former patients who found a calling while under the harsh glare of the operating room lights rather than by scientific studies. The Planetree model, for example,

was conceived by Angelica Thieriot, whose hospitalization (for a viral infection, though Devlin leaves out the detail) convinced her that medical technology had a dehumanizing effect on the patient. The first Planetree unit, which opened in 1985 in San Francisco, features a library for patients to learn about their illnesses, open nursing stations to facilitate discussion with medical staff, and patient rooms that contain kitchens and amenities for visiting family members.

Ironically, for a book about the importance of form, Devlin's prose often feels slapdash, as if aesthetics and style are irrelevant after all. Transitions between subsections are desultory, topic sentences are rare, redundancies occur, and the book lacks a real introduction. The rhetorical effect of such sloppiness is not entirely negative, however. Reading the book, I often felt as if I were seated alongside Devlin as she pored over stacks of studies, thinking somewhat messily—but in a seasoned, authoritative manner—aloud. The text has a captivating immediacy that a more polished rewrite might not retain. Geographers seeking psychological insight into place might consider pulling up a chair and listening in as well.