

Person-Environment Knowledge: Instrumentality, Interpretation, Promotion

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Abstract

This paper deals with ontological, cultural, methodological, and epistemological dimensions of person-environment theory. It suggests that the conventional metaphor that calls for *bridging the gap* between research and practice is unhelpful and should be replaced by a framework that addresses three points critical to the discourse on person-environment knowledge.

First, we need to consider its instrumentality, that is the specificity of the tasks to which such knowledge is supposed to apply. Policy making and design, for example, are substantially different, if ideally complementary, tasks that require different kinds of knowledge. In particular, design-relevant knowledge must take into account the fact that the objects that constitute the environment tend to derive their value from their uniqueness while research seeks generalization.

Second, we need to accept the inevitability of interpretation as a process that mediates between the generation of knowledge and its application. Attention to interpretation is a necessary component of person-environment studies because the praxis—whether in research or interventions—is never value- or ideology-free. This does not imply that knowledge is subjective, merely that applicability requires, among other things, that value and assumption systems be explicitly examined and their linkages to proposed actions be exposed.

Finally, we should recognize that the built environment is not only a mirror of society, but also a participant in its construction. This implies that the environment has a persuasive and promotional role that research cannot ignore. The dynamics of the processes of intention and fruition in the built environment have been surprisingly absent from person-environment studies, yet it is precisely from these processes that the environment derives its power to affect our lives.

Key-words: Person-Environment Knowledge, Instrumentality, Interpretation, Promotion.

Introduction

Elsewhere, I suggested a parallel between current geopolitical conditions of simultaneous globalization and fragmentation and the forces that foster both unity and fragmentation within the field of people-environment studies (Francescato, 2002). However, that suggestion also raises a question: Is our field well equipped to make significant contributions to the resolution of issues shaped by the coexistence of contradictory tendencies that characterizes our current world? To answer this question requires that the problem of the relevance of our work, that is, the problem of applications, be addressed with greater attention than has been the case heretofore.

Issues of research applications have hovered in the background of person-environment studies since the inception of the field. The need for *bridging the gap* between research findings and policy/planning/design practices has often been proposed as a paradigm that might be helpful in addressing this problem. However, I believe that this is a singularly unhelpful metaphor. It is unhelpful because it implies a divide that separates two modes of acting in the world: that of those who study it and that of those who construct it. As Saegert (1987) noted, this view, is commonly held among social scientists and emphasizes *the separation between the researcher and the problem* (p. 101). Concomitant with this view, is the assumption of an irreconcilable dichotomy between empiricism and positivism on the one hand, and phenomenology on the other (Franck, 1987).

If the difficulties and scarcity of research applications were due mainly to the existence of this gap, it would be reasonable to devote our energies to bridging it. But where is the evidence for this hypothesis? How is it possible that after decades of concentrated work in this area we are no closer to widespread and effective application of research findings than we were when the field began? In light of the persistence of this problem, shouldn't we question the validity of the assumption? In my view, these questions all point to the absence of an adequate conceptual framework for people-environment studies. I am not the first to call attention to our reluctance to engage in the arduous task of theory building. But it is precisely from such a task that answers to the application issue are likely to emerge. Nothing, as Kurt Lewin's often quoted statement points out, is as practical as a good theory. Note, however, that what I suggest here

does not involve the plethora of person-environment relations theories described and discussed in the literature, but a theory of the *field* of person-environment studies.

Such a theory should address these fundamental questions: The ontological (what is the nature of the field?); the cultural (what is its role?); and the methodological (what are its procedures?). These questions, in turn, are inseparably bound up with the epistemological aspect (what is the nature of person-environment knowledge?). It follows that if we seek a wider and more meaningful application of research findings, the first order of business is the development of a clear, valid, and robust understanding of the nature of this knowledge.

Dimensions of Person-Environment Knowledge

Instrumentality

In this paper, I discuss three dimensions that I believe are central to the discourse on person-environment knowledge. First, we must address its instrumentality, that is the specificity of the tasks to which such knowledge is supposed to apply. This requires developing an understanding of the similarities and differences in the characteristics of the knowledge base required to address specific practical tasks. For example, planning and design are substantially different, if ideally complementary, tasks that require different kinds of knowledge. Because deliberation and forethought are common to both activities, it is easy to imagine that they also share a knowledge base and *modus operandi*, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Planning implies the making of policies, rules, and regulations which, though setting limits for what might be built, do not in themselves specify its form. Thus knowledge relevant to these tasks is likely to be characterized by predictive modes able to quantify desirable outcomes in the economic, social, and political arenas. Such outcomes are not generally perceived to be tied to particular environmental forms, but rather to expected public benefits that are thought to justify the imposition of limits to the otherwise unfettered actions of individuals. This is true even in the case in which policies and regulations are directed not to constraining but to providing incentives, since any incentive always carries a cost. It follows that knowledge derived from statistical modes of

inquiry is especially useful for planning purposes and indeed applications of such knowledge in planning is rather widespread.

Design, on the other hand, is all about specifying the form of the objects and spaces that constitute the environment. The value attributed to such objects and spaces is as much a function of their uniqueness as it is of similarities among them. People flock to Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum because of the uniqueness of Gehry's design, not because of its (mostly functional) similarities to other museums. But even beyond the domain of signature buildings, it is to a large extent from the specific features and characteristics of an environment that we derive value, as Muratori (1959) has shown in his *instrumental history* of Venice. In this work, he studied and described, for example, the features of that city's *calli* and *campi*, rather than discussing them only as belonging to the generic public space categories of streets and squares. This poses an obvious challenge to research that seeks generalization. Similarly, because the built environment tends to last for a long time, even in contemporary, throw-away societies, design is essentially a future-oriented task the outcomes of which must be capable of adapting to changing, possibly unforeseeable, conditions, whereas research is best at accounting for past events. These challenges are not necessarily insurmountable, but they require that we evolve conceptual frameworks and operational methodologies capable of dealing with them.

In this connection, typological perspectives hold significant promise and should, in my view, become a central component of any discourse on person-environment studies (Francescato, 1994). I refer here to addressing the problem of providing meaningful descriptions of the environment being studied. Person-environment research tends to use purely functional taxonomies for this purpose. For example, in housing research it is common to classify residential buildings as townhouses, apartments, detached homes, and so on. These so-called building typologies may represent convenient categories, but they tell us little, if anything, about the specific aspects of, say, apartments, which constitute the knowledge an architect would rely on to design a successful apartment for a particular class of households in a specific cultural-geographical location. The idea of architectural type, as opposed to that of building type, suggests the possibility of a more meaningful approach,

able to preserve both holistic and specific characteristics of phenomena under study.

Interpretation

Second, we need to accept the inevitability of interpretation. In the context of this paper, interpretation applies both to the process that mediates between the generation of knowledge and its application *and* to the processes through which users and designers assess the value of environmental conditions. In other words, researchers interpret data, the public interprets the environment in which they live, and designers interpret environmental problems and opportunities. Attention to interpretation is a necessary component of person-environment studies because the praxis—whether in the experience of space, in research, or in interventions—is never value- or ideology-free. Interpretation plays a role in shaping a researcher's view of the task at hand, of the strategies and procedures that are brought to bear on the problem, and of the meaning to be derived from the research findings. Similarly, it governs users' and designers' views of environmental issues.

Saegert (1987) discussed three models that underlie interpretative aspects of people-environment studies: a technological, an interpretive, and a transformative synthesis model. The first comprises the vast majority of the work in the field. In this model, the task is understood as that of suggesting interventions on the base of knowledge gathered from social science research. A consensus is assumed to exist about the conditions that need to be changed as well as about the goals of the intervention. Because this model does not account for the interdependence and interaction between people and environment nor for potential disagreements about goals and means between researchers and those involved in interventions, its usefulness is severely limited. It is, in fact, the model that best fits the bridging-the-gap perspective alluded to earlier.

The interpretive model entails a more sophisticated understanding of the role of the various actors that may be involved, including that of the people who are the targets of intervention. Thus it takes into account the values, intentions, and agendas of specific groups and it acknowledges the mutually interactive nature of people-environment transactions. In this model, researchers construct a narrative that attempts to account for

the experiences of various actors. It is therefore a model that depends to a considerable extent on verbal communication. This becomes a significant obstacle in the study of people's experiences in the physical environment for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the visual nature of environmental perception and environmental design. Moreover, because the narrative is controlled by the researcher, the model does not necessarily account for the fact that researchers have their own goals and ideologies which may or may not be congruent with those of other actors and target population.

Finally, the model that Saegert (1987) prefers and labels *transformative synthesis* (p. 104) attempts to overcome the weakness of the two models previously described by acknowledging the web of socioeconomic, cultural, political, value, and power positions of researchers as well as those of all other involved actors. It also attempts to deal with the role of the researcher as an agent of change by suggesting that he or she become an advocate of change, go beyond the limits of available knowledge to achieve it, and actively participate in whatever is necessary to obtain consensus among actors and control over resources. Implicit in this view is the idea that the scholar and the practitioner can not reside on two separate sides of a gap. Rather, they must occupy the same spot. Saegert (1987) puts it succinctly when she writes that "transformative research and practice become *not only interdisciplinary but also antidisiplinary*" (p. 105, my Italics).

Another important aspect of the issue of interpretation resides in the fact that buildings and spaces, though constructed for the primary purpose of sheltering activities, nevertheless also communicate. As soon as there is a society, wrote Barthes (1967), every usage is converted into a sign of itself (p. 41). To be sure, buildings and spaces can be seen as complex texts woven of many signs, but this only points to their quality of being under-coded texts (Eco, 1976), and thus open to interpretations—not infrequently widely divergent ones when it comes to assessments. Bonta (1979) called attention to the complexities involved in interpretation of architectural objects, to the frequent lack of congruence between designer's intention and user's interpretation, and to the discontinuity of interpretations across time and groups of interpreters. This does not imply that knowledge about such interpretations is ineffable or subjective. But it suggests that applicability requires, among other

things, that value and assumption systems of environmental users and environmental designers be explicitly examined and their linkages to proposed actions be exposed.

In my view, insufficient attention has been devoted by our field to the implications of the issues discussed by Saegert and Bonta. Until this is done, and modes of operation have been developed that take them effectively into account, I see little hope for the generation of truly applicable knowledge. Because cultural criticism perspectives tend to probe areas of interpretation which traditional social science approaches have the most difficulty dealing with, such perspectives may be particularly helpful in this quest.

Promotion

We also need to acknowledge that the built environment is not only a mirror of society, but also an ingredient in its construction. This implies that the environment has a persuasive and promotional role that research cannot ignore. Without falling into the trap of a naive physical determinism, we need to recognize that the interactions between environment and behavior are not limited to convenient analytic categories such as privacy, territoriality, way-finding, attachment-to-place, or any other such designation—however useful any of these concepts may be for the purposes of traditional social and behavioral research.

The dynamics of the processes of intention and fruition in the built environment have been surprisingly absent from person-environment studies, yet it is precisely from these processes that the environment derives its power to affect our lives. The design disciplines themselves, of course, have been notoriously disinclined to delve into the promotional dimension of design, preferring to privilege purely aesthetic concerns. Pevsner's (1960) often cited statement *A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture* (p. 8) exemplifies an attitude that implicitly or explicitly pervades architectural discourse.

It is not my intention to deny or belittle the role of aesthetics in influencing designers' intentions and the public's fruition. But as Benjamin (1968) and Eco (1968) have noted, most of the time we experience the environment inattentively. Consequently, the persuasive nature of the built environment does not hinge primarily on aesthetic dimensions, the import of which obviously depends on reflective

concentration. Eco (1968) points out that the fruition of buildings and spaces occurs primarily in modes that are more like those in which we experience, say, television or advertising, than those we bring to viewing Picasso's *Guernica* or listening to a Mozart's quartet. This suggests that the research approaches of rhetoric and mass communication could be applied in our field as well. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the degree to which communication succeeds in persuading depends on a delicate balance between redundancy—the expected, the known—and information—the new and unexpected. This consideration has significant implications for design and planning since considerable variance is likely to exist among different groups and cultures in what is expected and in tolerance for the unexpected.

Conclusion

In this paper I have dealt with ontological, cultural, methodological, and epistemological dimensions of person-environment theory. I suggested that the conventional metaphor that calls for *bridging the gap* between research and practice is unhelpful. I posited that a more productive direction lies in developing a better understanding of the nature of person-environment knowledge. At a minimum, this requires that the central issues of instrumentality, interpretation and promotion inform the discourse of our field to a much greater extent than has been the case up to now.

If the field of people-environment studies is to keep the promise for which it was founded—to generate knowledge that can be widely applied to the building of more humane, more satisfying, and more sustainable environments—much work remains to be done in the exploration of the nature of that knowledge.

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