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Connections

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This article is the first article in our new series entitled, "Connections." Each month, we will write a short essay on various sociological topics that relate to the profession of architecture. The topics will range from methods of questionnaire and survey construction to the use of organizational assessment studies during facility programming. We hope the series of essays will contribute to the architectural profession in four ways: 1) help to bridge the gap between the disciplines of sociology and architecture, 2) broaden the design professional's knowledge of sociology by showing how the sociological perspective can be used to enhance building design, 3) challenge the design professional's assumptions about the role the architect plays in our society (we see an expanded role), and 4) bring new thinking to the practice of architecture.

Getting to a Better Future through Sociology and Architecture…
We will begin the series by providing a definition of sociology. Next, we will discuss the ways in which sociologists and architects have collaborated in the past and finally we will propose ways in which the sociologist might assist the architect in today's complex world.

In the eighteenth century, revolutions in Europe and North America completely changed the traditional social order of the times and ushered in new perspectives on human social life. Out of this period of social, intellectual, economic, and political unrest came the idea of creating a science of human society. Sociology, as the new science was called in 1839, developed in Europe in the nineteenth century and today has become a dominant discipline of American scholarship. According to the American Sociological Association, sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the effects of divorce; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from the sociology of sport to the sociology of architecture. In fact, few fields have such broad scope and relevance for research, theory, and application of knowledge.

As a result of the wide range of quantitative and qualitative research methods used by sociologists, the field now contains a large body of findings relevant to architecture. Some of those topics include organizational development, organizational effectiveness, job satisfaction, how people express emotions at work, how space design influences organizational well-being, how architectural environments are intimately intertwined with the cultural imperatives of the society, and how buildings impact human behavior. Because sociology addresses some of the most challenging issues of our time, it is an expanding field whose relationship with the discipline of architecture is becoming more apparent.

The interaction between the sociologist and architect dates back to the birth of sociology, but it was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's that triggered the birth of social design. According to Robert Sommer (professor at the University of California - Davis) the social design movement arose to correct the misalignments between people and their built environments, especially in prison, hospital and governmental settings. Dr. Sommer describes social design as the process of creating physical environments that meet the social needs of the occupants. During the 1960s and

1970s, architects invited social scientists into the design process to help them better understand the relationship between the building and human behavior. Sommer and others assisted architects from the pre-design phase through post occupancy in six major areas: human use of space, awareness and environmental cognition, environmental preferences, user needs analysis, participatory design, and post occupancy evaluation. Sociologists assisted architects by collecting data through surveying, interviewing, and participant observation to identify the current and future *space and social needs* of the future occupants of a building.

Specifically, how might today's sociologist assist the architect? Sociologists offer a unique perspective through which they view the world. This perspective is one that sees individual problems as part of a larger historical or macro context. The sociological mind is able to move quickly from micro to macro modes of thinking, similar to the problem-solving mind of the architect. Therefore, the sociologist is well suited to assist the architect in the following areas:

Predesign and Programming Phase: Assistance could include--
.Baseline research (problem definition, data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation) .
.Neighborhood needs assessment studies and social trend analysis
.Building and organizational typology research
.Human factors analysis (group demographics, roles and relationships, and member values, beliefs, customs, perceptions)
.Organization-based analysis (organizational culture, social structure, human relations, decision-making, conflict, operational processes, and strategic planning)

Design Phases: Assistance might focus on the social impact of the proposed design concept. Sociologists would observe and analyze the project team and the group dynamic, and facilitate design team and user interaction.

Construction Phase: Sociologists could observe the architect-contractor relationship giving feedback and identifying the most effective interaction mechanisms

Post-Construction Phase: Assistance could be given to post-occupancy evaluations in order to determine if the designed environments support the needs of the various stakeholders (for example, workers, customers, managers, owners, and the public).

In conclusion, at a time when our nation's attention is centered on the role of buildings in our lives – and the devastation caused by their unexpected destruction – we are fortunate to be part of a community in which we are encouraged to grapple with the meaning of architecture in a larger sociological context. What is the purpose of architecture, beyond providing spaces in which people live and conduct their business? What do the buildings we construct say about us as a community and as a society? What obligation, if any, do design professionals have to build structures that provide a meaningful environment for our lives and "places" where organizational life can thrive? It would seem professionally fruitful, if not an obligation, for both sociologists and architects to accelerate their sharing of perspectives and to continue to working jointly toward the goal of connecting people to our designed environments.

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