To: Kevin Lynch
From: William Alonso

June 28, 1958

Re: The introduction of terms and concepts from psychology, social psychology and sociology into material in this project.

I am going thru the formality of a memo on this matter because what I have to say is rather elusive and might become diluted in a conversation or else might slip my mind altogether.

This project has been thus far proceeding using the traditional language of the arts and particularly of architecture and civic design. To this has been added a pragmatic sprinkling of psychological and near-psychological terms and a few new terms (such as “visibility”) specifically introduced for this study. Not all of these terms have a multitude of near relatives in the other disciplines, so that at times it appears that formulation would be possible. However, this cannot or should not be done, in my opinion, for a host of reasons, some of which I will sketch below.

The first reason that comes to mind is the considerable investment in the current approach and terminology of the project. This investment is in terms of time, effort, money, existing data and theoretical formulation, emotional involvement of those working in the project, etc. The postulating of equivalences and reshaping what exists would
be a major undertaking, requiring enormous effort, causing much strain, and losing many valuable ideas and insights.

A second reason is that the social sciences do not possess a general theory to which all subscribe and to which all new knowledge is additive. Particular terms and concepts, as a rule, usually acquire their meaning in a discipline in terms of a systematic theory. Therefore the choice is one of eclecticism or submission to a particular approach, which would be, I believe, somewhat arbitrary. Moreover, many of the concepts that appear most relevant from past or partial or even one-fact theories, and their integration is a task clearly beyond us.

As a related but different point, there is the matter of focus of interest for an investigation. In matters of perception one may use a very rough distinction of "who", "how", and "what" is perceived. The social sciences have generally emphasized the "who" (in terms of personality), systems and the like, the "how" (in terms of mechanisms of perception). Our interest centers on the "what". That is, the city and certain elements within it. Clearly, any grand theory would combine all these elements, but, given the undeveloped stage of the thinking of all concerned, the problem of focus of interest remains an obstacle for even the most primitive integration.
There is another aspect to this matter: our focus of interest is on essentially normative and derives from a humanistic approach; that is the social sciences is analytical, and derives from a scientific approach. Whereas the need of either approach for any given purpose, the training of those working in the project (and the above mentioned investment) commit us to the humanistic-normative.

Besides these rather general points, many other matters make the work of this project irreducible to the more "scientific" disciplines. I will only mention one, the problem of scale in perception. Those dealing with perception and cognition in psychology and social psychology have used by and large (as far as I know) objects and fields for stimulus of a size ranging up to the largest that is a large room. Now, we are clearly dealing with a set of "stimuli" millions of times larger, of a very different time dimension (it includes, at times, all of the life experience of the subject). The methods of organization of perception are, therefore, quite different in our area of concern than in those considered by traditional psychology, except for the more generalized and fundamental (which are widely among psychological approaches). One set of psychological experiments is relevant here: those which deal with the phenomenon of "perception. It has been found that if, say, a subject is presented with two objects of different size, and rewarded for reacting in a given way (e.g., making a choice) on the basis of the
size relationship, there appears to be a breaking point at which the element of relationship is no longer the primary one perceived, but that some size becomes paramount. This "ceiling" up to which the relationship is seen as primary becomes higher with the ability of the subject to conceptualize the relationship and express it verbally.

The matter of scale is a two-edged sword, however. Whereas in large-scale matters we are dealing with phenomena which are outside the range of terms cognizable in psychology, so it seems to me that in many of the statements of perception (including recognition, et al.) at a smaller scale, the concepts and language used for smaller-scale perceptions in this project are somewhat naive, and demonstrably inadequate in terms of whatever psychological approach one chooses. But again, for the reasons outlined above, it would be impossible within the present situation to try to correct this at one fell swoop.

So? The long or the short of it is that we should use common sense and judgment in gradually introducing some of the psychological ideas. I see two principal areas for this introduction: (1) in the existing material, where anyone feels that more can be gained than lost, and general consensus of those working on the project is obtained; and (2) in the forthcoming work, where a new term or concept is needed, we might more summarily about psychological literature to find how they have dealt
with this problem. In this type of thing, I have been thinking of introducing for the purpose of interview analysis, the concept of "schema" as an intervening variable in perception and orientation. I have spoken with Steve Green about it and am in the throes of defining and clarifying my own ideas about it. The concept has a heavy past, with much thinking and literature behind it, and I think that we can tailor it to our own advantage, and that it may ease the task of analysis and clarify (and perhaps even standardize somewhat) the results.