

December 4, 1953

Research Proposal

The Center for Urban and Regional Studies proposes to conduct the following research project. It will deal with the relation of the individual to the urban physical environment as directly perceived by the various senses.

Hypothesis:

The following hypothesis is set up; alternative formulations will be developed in the course of the study:

- (1) That there are important psychological satisfactions to be derived from the sensuous form of the urban environment, and that the presence or lack of these satisfactions affect the actions, emotional state, and pleasure of the citizen.
- (2) That the basic satisfactions in our culture include at least the following:
 - (a) A certain unity, connectedness, or organization in the urban environment, allowing the inhabitant to sense the whole, orient himself within it, and grasp the relation of part to whole.
 - (b) A high level of meaning in the physical forms of parts and whole, expressive of their particular natures and functions, allowing the user to "read" the city easily, and to feel that it is "warm," interesting, that it has character or is well adapted to human ends.
 - (c) A wide range of intensities of activity and communication in various parts of a city, this variety so linked together and mutually set off that each individual can choose the intensity he desires, yet can always sense the total range and can move easily from one level to another, achieving a rhythm of stimulus and relaxation, communication and privacy, constraint and freedom.

Objective:

The objective of the project would be to test and develop this hypothesis, and to suggest new urban forms which might better serve the indicated satisfactions.

The project would be carried out as a series of closely-related sub-projects:

- (1) Make a survey of the literature in psychology and esthetics which bears on the hypothesis, preparing a definitive bibliography and summarizing the relevant theories and data.
- (2) Carry out two investigations tied to existing urban areas. Two areas would be chosen, both including residence and some more intensive use, such as a shopping center. Neither should be too large nor too far from the Center at M.I.T. for convenient study. As far as possible, each should house approximately the same economic and social class, preferably neither high nor low on the scale. The physical environments should differ, however, as to presumed amenity, and at least one of the areas should be typical of a developed urban section in the U.S. Central Square, Cambridge, and {blank space}, are tentatively recommended. In these two areas, the following sub-projects would be carried out:

- (a) [margin: movie techs} Analyze the form of the given area: visual, auditory, etc. Trained observers would be used to prepare a vocabulary of the elements of this piece of the urban environment, and to interpret their interrelations in terms of the hypothesis. Where, in the course of the general study, certain elements prove to have critical impact on the citizen, they would be studied in detail, with careful descriptions and an analysis of the significant past decisions and forces which determined their use, form, and location.

(b) Analyze the reactions of a sample of residents of the area to the assumed satisfactions. Psychological techniques would be used, such as depth interviews, thematic apperception, records of activity, etc. The same methods would also be employed to indicate what urban elements are of critical importance in terms of frequency or strength of impact, and to test powers of discrimination in perceiving the environment. Possibly, the tests may explore the total emotional attitude toward the city of these particular people, or be preceded by pilot interviews with persons widely scattered over the city as a whole.

(3) As particular conclusions or problems appear, skilled designers would be employed to develop new forms for urban use which might better satisfy the psychological requirements. These new forms would be checked against the criteria developed, and also tested for their impact on the previously employed samples of area residents. Testing would be by means of models, visual representations, or other techniques to be devised according to the purpose of the test.

Timing:

The total project is estimated to require a period of two years. During the first year, sub-projects 1 and 2a would be accomplished and 2b initiated. In the second year, sub-project 2b would be completed, and 3 accomplished.

Staff Requirements:

Staff requirements are estimated as follows:

(1) Two present members of the teaching staff, Professors Kepes and Lynch, the one presently teaching visual design, the other city planning. Both would

require release for half-time work on the project, being in joint charge of the total enterprise and entering into all the sub-projects in greater or less degree.

(2) Three other principals, of high professional caliber, to be brought in from outside on a half-time arrangement:

(a) A psychologist, to direct sub-project 2b, and to participate in 1 and 3.

(b) A designer, to direct sub-project 3, and to participate in 2a.

(c) A cameraman, photographer or modelmaker, to accomplish the basic work in sub-project 2a, and to participate in 3.

(3) In addition to the above principals, two or three part-time assistants would also be required from time to time in various aspects of the work. They would be recruited principally from graduate students in planning, architecture, or psychology.