

To: Kevin Lynch

June 20, 1956

From: William Alonso

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. Most of these terms have a multitude of near relatives in the other disciplines, so that at times it appears that translation would be possible. However, this cannot & 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 suscription to a particular approach, which would be, of necessity, somewhat arbitrary. Moreover, many of the concepts that appear most relevant form part of 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) and the “how” (in terms of mechanisms of perception). Our interest clusters in the “what” – that is, the city and certain elements within it. Clearly, any grand theory would combine all these elements, but, given the underdeveloped 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 eventually normative and derives from a humanistic approach; that of the social sciences is analytical, and derives from a scientific approach. Whatever the merits of either approach for any given purpose, the training of those working in the project (and the above mentioned investment) commit as 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 that of 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 and 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 vary widely among psychological approaches). One set of psychological experiments is relevant here: those which deal with the phenomenon of “transposition.” 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 of absolute 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 terra cognita in psychology, it seems to me that in many of the statements on perception (including recognition, et al.) at a smaller scale, the concepts and language used in this project are somewhat naïve, 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 and the short of it is that we should use common sense and judgement 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 in the project is obtained; and, (2) in the forthcoming work, when a new term or concept is needed, we might rummage about psychological literature to find how they have dealt

with the problem. In this type of thing, I have been thinking of introducing for the purpose of interview analysis, the concept of "schema" as an interviewing variable in perception and orientation. I have spoken with Dave Crane about it and am in the throes of defining and classifying my own ideas about it. The concept has a hoary 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.