

Behavioral Significance of Milieu: a Consideration of Two Downtown Settings

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ABSTRACT.—Behavior patterns in parks and plazas in downtown Syracuse, New York, are discussed. After an introduction of the spaces and their principal users, fundamental concepts borrowed from ecological psychology are defined. Then using these concepts, the behavioral significance of the environment is illustrated in a comparison of two case studies. The concepts employed here are shown to allow a discussion of the important effect of environment on behavior without producing deterministic distortions.

THE OBJECTIVES of this exploratory research were to investigate (1) who was using parks and plazas in downtown Syracuse, New York; (2) whether behavior patterns were discernible in these spaces; and (3) the ways in which physical and social factors influence these patterns.

We soon discovered that distinct user groups and behavior patterns could be identified, and our attention then became focused on the ways in which social and physical factors work together to shape these behavior patterns. In considering our preliminary results, we found that some fundamental concepts taken from Barker's theory of behavior settings (Barker 1968) provided a very useful framework for interpretation. After setting the context and defining these concepts, we will discuss two case studies that illustrate some of the mechanisms relating behavior patterns and physical environments.

THE CONTEXT

For two summers (1974 and 1975), outdoor amenity spaces in downtown Syracuse were studied. In many respects, Syracuse is a typical medium-size city (population, city limits:

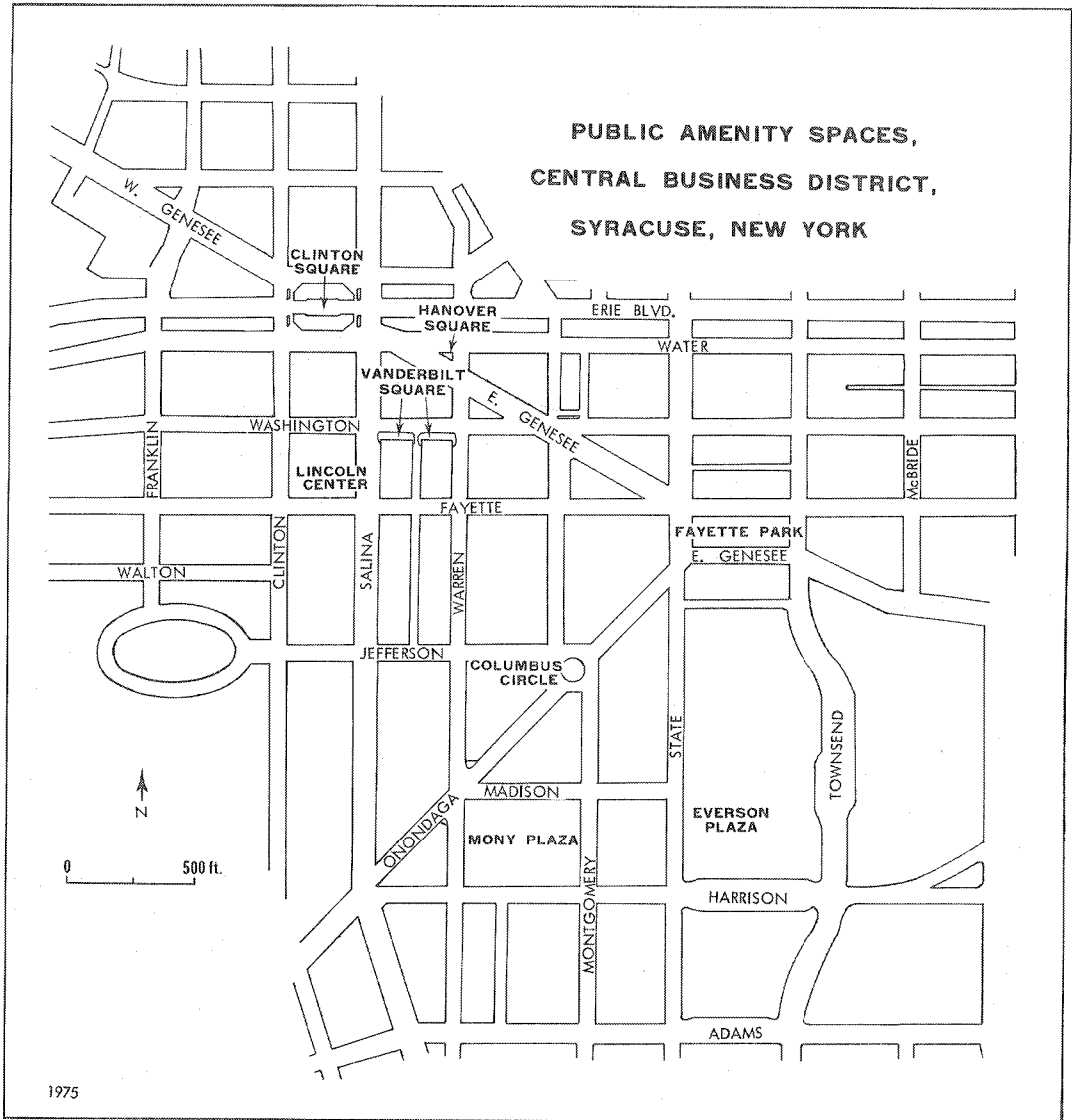
157,000; Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area: 637,000). It is undergoing the same demographic and economic changes as most other American cities: residential movement to the suburbs is leaving a deteriorating central city and an ailing Central Business District (CBD). A keen interest in CBD amenity spaces is one expression of a campaign by city officials, businessmen, and assorted Syracuse enthusiasts to revitalize the downtown.

The set of outdoor amenity spaces investigated for this study included (fig. 1): (1) two commonly recognized loci of downtown social activity, Columbus Circle and Clinton Square; (2) one space dominated by urban drifters and derelicts, Hanover Square; (3) one space used primarily by retired men, Vanderbilt Square; (4) two spaces associated with large new offices buildings, MONY Plaza and Lincoln Center; and (5) two large but little used spaces, Everson Plaza and Fayette Park.

For this whole set of spaces, five major user groups can be identified in terms of their influence on daytime behavior patterns:

1. *Female office workers.* — This group consists mostly of single females

Figure 1.—Parks and plazas studied in downtown Syracuse.



between the ages of 18 and 30 engaged in clerical work downtown (secretaries, file clerks, key punch operators).

2. *Male white-collar workers.*—These men are mostly between the ages of 18 and 30 and are employed in sales, administration, and professional occupations.

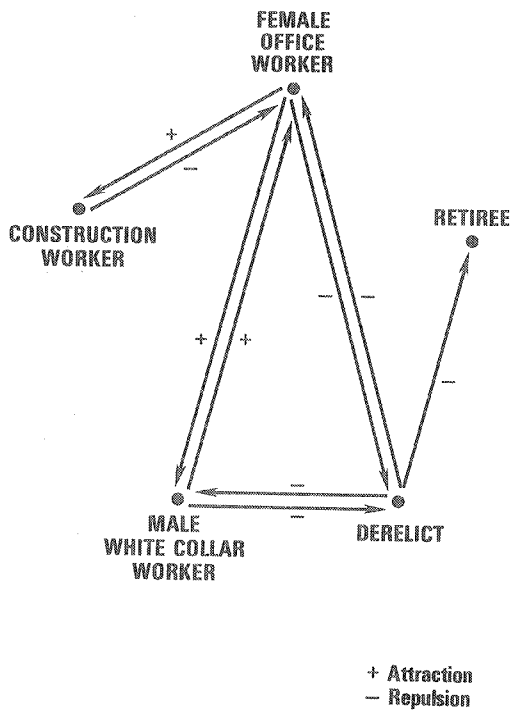
3. *Construction workers.*—As the CBD undergoes physical transformation, these men are employed to demolish old structures and build new ones. Their labor is of both the un-

skilled and skilled varieties. In age range, they are similar to the male white-collar workers.

4. *Male retirees.*—These elderly men regularly venture downtown to meet with their cohorts for a day of reading and conversation.

5. *Dereelicts.*—Mostly between the ages of 30 and 50, at least half of these men are obvious alcohohics. Many of them panhandle throughout the downtown, but use Hanover Square (for decades called "Hangover Square") as their home base.

Figure 2.—Relationships between user groups in downtown parks and plazas.



Interaction between these groups is important to the behavioral fabric of the downtown. Our observations suggest linkages of attraction and repulsion (fig. 2). It should be noted that these relationships are simple abstractions that refer to how two groups will interrelate in the absence of other groups. These basic relationships, however, can be altered under various circumstances such as the presence of other groups. For example, derelicts will be less threatening to female office workers when male white-collar workers are present.

BEHAVIOR SETTINGS

From Barker's ecological psychology, we have drawn a set of concepts that allows us to discuss the significance of

environment to behavior without implying rigid deterministic causality. We have found these concepts very useful for our work in Syracuse and are convinced that they have value for other social scientists and designers interested in environment and behavior.

The grand concept of ecological psychology is the "behavior setting" (*Barker 1968:18-34*). This is a behavioral unit that refers to an enduring pattern of behaviors situated in time and space. A university class meeting is a good example of a behavior setting: a variety of role interactions (professor, student, man, woman) produce an overall pattern of behavior that has a definite bounded location (a classroom) and a definite beginning and end (the class hour). It is important to recognize that a behavior setting is behavior, space, and time—all three as equal elements—in interrelationship.

The behavioral component of a behavior setting is called the "standing pattern of behavior". These are behavior patterns of people en masse, which are set in a particular time and place. For example, in downtown parks we found standing patterns of behavior that appeared and disappeared with the lunch hour. Individuals would enter and leave these patterns freely; yet the patterns would persist throughout the lunch hour, day to day, week to week. Standing patterns of behavior do not depend on the particular individuals involved.

The "milieu" is the "objective" component of a behavior setting. The spatial and temporal ambience of behavior, existing independently of anyone's perception of it, constitutes the milieu. The major features of the milieus we studied were the individual morphologies of the downtown amenity spaces and the hours between 11:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on summer weekdays.

In a behavior setting, the behavior and milieu are said to be "synomorphic." This simply means that the behavior and its spatial and temporal ambience are

somehow compatible. For example, one does not go to a downtown plaza to practice belly dancing; it hardly seems like the appropriate environment. We will explore some of the mechanisms involved in synomorphism in more detail later.

Behavior-milieu units are called "synomorphs." With this term, a much needed word is added to the vocabulary of the environmental designer and researcher. Synomorphs are not behavior alone, nor milieu alone; they are behavior, space, and time, all together in a single unit.

Behavior settings are *sets* of synomorphs. For example, the standing patterns of behavior *and* the space and time of downtown parks during summer weekday lunch hours are behavior settings. Some of these behavior settings comprise a single synomorph, while others, because of spatial divisions within the space, include several synomorphs.

For a variety of reasons, ecological psychology is certainly *not* the final word in behavioral research: much of Barker's work introduces a precision that obscures rather than illuminates. But, even so, we find that the concepts just defined allow a useful perspective for discussions of environment and behavior. The following case studies will serve to demonstrate.

CASE STUDIES

This discussion of the lunchtime behavior settings in Columbus Circle and Clinton Square illustrates some of the mechanisms — both social and physical — involved with synomorphism. For those interested in behavior — especially for designers — this is a vitally important issue since the significance of the relationship of behavior and its context is affirmed repeatedly. The designer must be sensitive to the mechanisms involved in synomorphism. His charge is to produce particular kinds of behavior settings, not simply to add arti-

facts to the landscape. The empirical record for this point has been neglected by ecological psychologists, and we hope, with these brief case studies, to begin to remedy this deficiency.

Columbus Circle and Clinton Square share many characteristics: they are the two most commonly recognized CBD parks; each has historical significance; they are both large and centrally located; each is a major pedestrian intersection; all the major user groups have access to each space; each has a similarly large number of potential users; and both provide a pleasant esthetic experience. In spite of these similarities, however, the standing patterns of behavior for each setting are clearly different. The festive behavior setting in Columbus Circle is in striking contrast to the subdued setting in Clinton Square. The milieu for each setting is also clearly different. Consistent with the principle of behavior-milieu synomorphism, behavioral differences can be largely understood by examining milieu differences.

Columbus Circle

Columbus Circle is a relatively large park located in the southern part of the CBD (fig. 1 and 3). It is snugly situated in the midst of mostly municipal and religious buildings: the Public Library to the north, the County Courthouse to the east, a Catholic cathedral to the west, and, on the south, a six-story office building. At one time a small traffic rotary, the western half of the Circle was recently connected to the front of the cathedral, and walking and sitting areas were developed around the fountain. Still a major pedestrian intersection, Columbus Circle is now the most heavily used park in the CBD; during the summer an average of about 80 people will congregate there at lunchtime.

Observation has shown that, in terms of the proportion of the total lunchtime user population, three groups dominate

Figure 3.—Columbus Circle, looking west. This photograph, taken in the spring, shows Columbus Circle still packed up for the winter; during the summer, benches are moved from the center of the cluster, and the fountain is in operation.



in Columbus Circle: female office workers, male white-collar workers, and construction workers. The standing pattern of behavior is heavily influenced by the interaction of these three groups.

Several types of behavior are common in the standing pattern: people watching, sunning, socializing, "hanging out" (waiting for unarranged gatherings to materialize), and, of course, eating. Columbus Circle is a vibrant behavior setting during the lunch hour, with a great deal of interaction occurring both

between and within participating user groups.

Perhaps the most common behavior in the pattern is people watching. On a typical day, a large majority of the Columbus Circle participants openly engage in this activity. The milieu of lunchtime Columbus Circle is particularly well suited for this behavior. With regard to the temporal aspects of the milieu, a summer weekday lunch hour is one of the times of peak pedestrian circulation in the CBD. This is obvious,

and it is a milieu characteristic which is, of course, not unique to Columbus Circle.

More interesting is the way in which the morphology of Columbus Circle serves the activity of people watching. The relationship of paths (invisible pedestrian corridors) and seating areas (benches and ledges) in Columbus Circle is such that most seats offer the individual a view, from a comfortable distance, of several lanes of movement. Furthermore, the seating areas are arranged so that users may discreetly view one another. One seating area, the southern quadrant of the fountain ledge, stands out among the others and can be considered a "stage" (an area that is a visual center of attraction and is visually connected to seating or viewing areas). Those who sit on the stage know that they are being watched, and they either choose to "perform" (become consciously involved with that visual interaction) or choose to ignore it. For those who wish to ignore it, the masking sound of the fountain facilitates insulation. Visual variety is evident: people can easily watch others within the context of paths, seating areas, and a stage.

A specialized and popular type of people-watching at Columbus Circle is girl-watching. The arrangement of seating areas and the stage serves this behavior remarkably well. The stage is not only the most visually accessible to other seating areas, but it is also the optimal sunning area. On a clear summer day, female office workers take to the stage, with their chins upturned toward the sun and their legs outstretched in an unmistakable sunning pose. Of course, some are less dramatic and simply sit normally postured and chat with friends. Whether or not they perform on the stage, their presence encourages the presence of other groups in nearby viewing areas — specifically male white-collar workers and construction workers.

When interviewed, both these groups

were explicit about their interest in the young ladies. Also, their location in the bench cluster in the southwest section of the Circle — an optimal position for viewing both the stage and paths — clearly demonstrates this interest.

The reaction of female office workers to construction workers is commonly negative: the earthy candor of the construction workers is not appreciated by the female office workers. In such proximity as just described, the construction workers' comments on the scene would perhaps be enough to convince the female office workers to move on. However, the sound of the fountain in the background is sufficient to remove the performers from their audience's verbal indiscretions.

Socializing is also a common activity in the Columbus Circle behavior setting: small groups engage in conversation, some individuals also moving freely among groups. The nature of the benches is such that six adults and their lunches can be accommodated comfortably on the same bench, and around the fountain ledge three adults can easily group together. Also, the visual and spatial proximity of seating areas makes it convenient to move from one area to another. The physical characteristics of Columbus Circle are highly compatible with gregarious socializing.

Related to people-watching and socializing is the activity of "hanging out" (waiting for spontaneous gatherings to occur). At least two features are required of a behavior setting so that it be appropriate for hanging out: first, it must serve as a popular gathering place; and, second, easy viewing of the space must be possible. As already discussed, Columbus Circle satisfies both these conditions.

Columbus Circle is, in short, "where the action is." Individuals gather to partake of the physical amenities and to interact socially with each other in a variety of ways. The milieu can be seen to encourage these pursuits.

Clinton Square

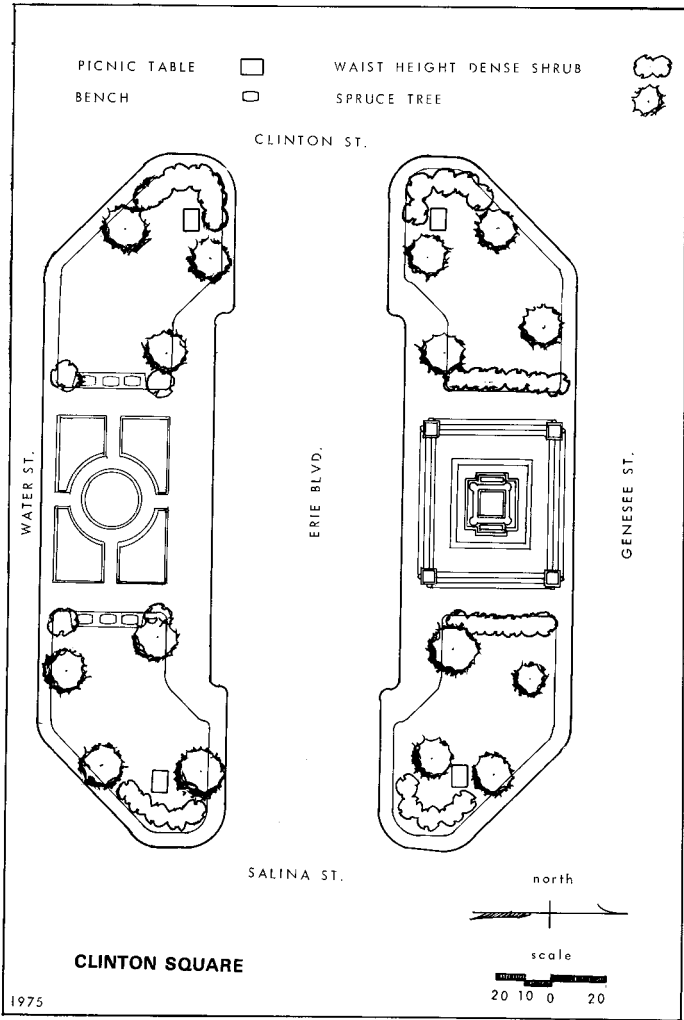
Clinton Square is a spacious park situated in the northern part of the CBD at the intersection of two major four lane arteries (fig. 1 and 4). The space is bordered on three sides — north, east, and west — by busy streets and is bisected by a major boulevard. The park essentially comprises two large grassy, relatively peaceful islands protected by dense shrubs and spruce trees from enveloping currents of traffic.

Strictly speaking, Clinton Square is probably two behavior settings rather than one. The southern part, with its

fountain, its relatively tranquil southern boundary, and its proximity to shopping, is easily the most popular. Our focus will be on this section.

Clinton Square is surrounded by municipal and commercial buildings; however, they are all separated from the Square by streets and parking lots. The buildings serve mainly as a backdrop to openness. Major employers are located nearby to the north and west of the Square. Because the principal lunchtime pedestrian flow is towards the main street on the park's eastern border, Clinton Square is a major pedestrian

Figure 4.—Clinton Square with its two parts, the fountain section to the south and the monument section to the north.



intersection at the noon hour. On the average, about 35 people use Clinton Square at lunchtime — slightly less than half the number using Columbus Circle.

Two user groups from the mainstay of the Clinton Square behavior setting: female office workers and construction workers. Interaction between the two groups plays little part in the character of the behavior setting.

Besides eating, only two types of behavior are common in the setting: socializing and “getting away” (any of a variety of solitary behaviors such as daydreaming, sleeping, and reading). The behavior setting is relatively quiet, and separate behaviors within the space are only tenuously integrated.

Socializing is the most commonly observed behavior in the setting. It is, however, a different variety than the type described in Columbus Circle. People come to Clinton Square in small groups, or they meet people there; they do not come to partake of a bustling social scene. Individuals are not seen visiting from group to group. Instead, private conversation and intimacy characterize the gatherings.

This type of low-key social scene can be better understood by examining the morphological aspects of Clinton Square’s milieu. Intimate socializing is fostered by the compartmental structure and the limited seating of Clinton Square. The park is a series of seating areas separated by thick hedges, trees, and a fountain. The vegetation barriers provide both visual and acoustic insulation. Viewing lanes are generally not well developed, and it is impossible to scan the whole setting from any particular position.

Notice that despite the presence of female office workers, the highly compatible groups of male white-collar workers are not present. The barriers are so formidable that they restrict even the most aggressive girl-watchers — construction workers — to simple conversation among themselves. These

characteristics not only make it difficult to feel a part of a large spontaneous social happening, but they also decrease the sense of protection characteristic of a highly integrated behavior setting. People can more easily feel vulnerable when separate from a large group. Also, the barriers make it difficult to assess possible threats present in the situation. These morphological restrictions on interaction and on situational legibility encourage many users to come to Clinton Square *with* their social companions rather than seek them in the space.

The other common behavior in the setting is “getting away”. As just discussed, the morphology of Clinton Square provides ample privacy for any behavior from this set of solitary activities. Also, because of the morphology’s effect on the nature of the socializing occurring in the behavior setting, solitary behavior blends well with the other common behavior. Getting away is not only physically possible but also socially consistent.

CONCLUSION

In comparing the lunchtime behavior settings at Columbus Circle and Clinton Square, we have seen the principle of behavior-milieu synomorphism in operation.

Each space has approximately the same contextual properties: easy access by all major user groups, a large number of potential participants, and proximity to restaurants and shops. Each space is a perceptual central place. Each space offers a similarly pleasant esthetic experience.

Yet, despite a host of similarities, two distinctly different behavior settings emerge from these spaces. We have seen that differences in behavior patterns can be directly linked to milieu differences. We have also specified some of the physical and social mechanisms by which this linkage occurs. Participants in these behavior settings respond to the physical pleasures of sun and attractive

sights and sounds. They also engage or disengage in a variety of social interactions such as talking to, watching, being watched by, and avoiding other people. We have seen how people, as physical *and* social entities, respond to different milieus to create different standing patterns of behavior.

It is often a tricky exercise to discuss the genuine behavioral significance of the environment free from deterministic overtones. Part of the problem is an inadequate vocabulary. In our discussion of Columbus Circle and Clinton Square, we have demonstrated that some of the concepts of ecological psychology can solve that problem. Within Barker's conceptual framework, we discussed behavior which was *compatible* with the milieu rather than behavior which was

the *product* of the milieu. We discussed enduring *standing patterns of behavior* rather than bogging down in simple behavior. We noted that standing patterns of behavior and milieu were compatible in behavior settings *without* depriving individuals, even large numbers of individuals, of the freedom to behave in ways that are totally *incompatible* with the milieu. We feel that these concepts offer a profitable alternative to determinism — either physical or social — for those interested in environments and behavior.

LITERATURE CITED

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