

Is there a psychologist in the building?

— CHRISTIAN JARRETT reports on psychology's place in new architectural development. —

- A** The space around us affects us profoundly – emotionally, behaviourally, cognitively. In Britain that space is changing at a pace not seen for a generation. Surely psychology has something to say about all this change. But is anyone listening? 'There is a huge amount of psychology research that is relevant, but at the moment we're talking to ourselves,' says Chris Spencer, professor of environmental psychology at the University of Sheffield. Spencer recalls a recent talk he gave in which he called on fellow researchers to make a greater effort to communicate their findings to architects and planners. 'I was amazed at the response of many of the senior researchers, who would say: "I'm doing my research for pure science, the industry can take it or leave it".' But there are models of how to apply environmental psychology to real problems, if you know where to look. Professor Frances Kuo is an example.
- B** Kuo's website provides pictures and plain English summaries of research conducted by her Human Environment Research Laboratory. Among these is a study using police records that found inner-city Chicago apartment buildings surrounded by more vegetation suffered 52 per cent fewer crimes than apartment blocks with little or no greenery. Frances Kuo and her co-researcher William Sullivan believe that greenery reduces crime – so long as visibility is preserved – because it reduces aggression, brings local residents together outdoors, and the conspicuous presence of people deters criminals.
- C** 'Environmental psychologists are increasingly in demand,' says David Uzzell, professor of environmental psychology. 'We're asked to contribute to the planning, design and management of many different environments, ranging from neighbourhoods, offices, schools, health, transport, traffic and leisure environments for the purpose of improving quality of life and creating a better people-environment fit.' Uzzell points to the rebuilding of one south London school as a striking example of how building design can affect human behaviour positively. Before its redesign, it was ranked as the worst school in the area – now it is recognised as one of the country's twenty most improved schools.
- D** Uzzell has been involved in a pioneering project between MSc students in England and Scotland. Architecture students in Scotland acted as designers while environmental psychology students in England acted as consultants, as together they worked on a community project in a run-down area of Glasgow. 'The psychology students encouraged the architecture students to think about who their client group was, to consider issues of crowding and social cohesion, and they introduced them to psychological methodologies, for example observation and interviewing local residents about their needs.' The collaborative project currently stands as a one-off experiment. 'Hopefully these trainee architects will now go away with some understanding of the psychological issues involved in design and will take into account people's needs,' says Uzzell.
- E** Hilary Barker, a recent graduate in psychology, now works for a design consultancy. She's part of a four-person research team that contributes to the overall work of the company in helping clients use their office space more productively. Her team all have backgrounds in psychology or social science, but the rest of the firm consists mainly of architects and interior designers. 'What I do is pretty rare to be honest,' Barker says. 'I feel very privileged to be able to use my degree in such a way.' Barker explains that the team carries out observational studies on behalf of companies, to identify exactly how occupants are using their building. The companies are often surprised by the findings, for example that staff use meeting rooms for quiet, individual work.