WHAT AMERICANS BUILD AND WHY

What Americans Build and Why examines five areas of America’s built environment: houses, health care facilities, schools, workplaces, and shopping environments. Synthesizing information from both academic journals and the popular press, this book examines the relationships of size and scale in the way Americans live their lives and how their way of life is fundamentally shaped by the highway system, cheap land, and incentives. This book is timely because, although Americans say they crave community, they continue to construct buildings such as McMansions and big box stores that make creating community a challenge. Furthermore, in many ways, the movement toward teleworking, discussed in the chapter on office environments, also challenges the traditional place-based formation of community. Although focused on the United States, this book includes reference to other parts of the world, especially regarding the retail environment.

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For Sloan. Carpe diem!
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This book expresses my ongoing fascination with the built environment. It is also a chance to incorporate many of the ideas I discuss in the course I teach in environmental psychology at Connecticut College. For those who are unfamiliar with the discipline of environmental psychology, it examines the relationship between human behavior and the environment. In the approach I take, I focus on the built environment (e.g., the benefits of high-vs. low-rise housing for the elderly), although a portion of the practitioners in this field focus on the natural environment. In this discipline, we often look at such traditional variables as crowding, personal space, and territoriality, or newer concerns such as recycling and sustainability. My approach to this topic has been somewhat different, focusing first on the facility type (e.g., health care facilities or schools) and then exploring a variety of behavioral manifestations within those building types, wherever the research led me.

*What Americans Build and Why* takes that “facility-first” approach; it presents chapters on five different types of facilities – our houses, health care facilities, schools, workplaces, and shops – essentially, places where Americans live their lives. Coverage of these topics combines research literature and popular media with personal reflection; I describe my approach as one of synthesis. Eminent environmental psychologist Robert Sommer described this approach best in his book on farmers markets of America when he said: “I have never believed that social research need be dull or celebration should ignore facts or figures.”[1] I couldn’t agree more.

Begun in 2007, this project has taken me about three years to complete. In that time, much has happened to affect America’s landscape. Who knew

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anything about credit default swaps three years ago (for that matter, who really understands them now)? Where appropriate, I have tried to incorporate data on some of the effects of this downturn – for example, in the number of retail establishments that have closed in the past year or so.

In addition, over the three-year period, one particular personal journey has greatly impacted my view of America. This personal journey began in spring 2009, the semester I spent teaching in Rome, Italy. I had traveled abroad but had never lived abroad. Nor had I ever lived in a city. The experience of living in a city, Rome in particular, has given me a new understanding of America, specifically, how vast and young its built environment is. I have also acquired an even greater understanding of the impact of the highway system, the creation and expansion of suburbs, and the role of legislation on almost every aspect of American life. My reflections on Rome, as they relate to America’s built landscape, are part of this book.
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