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978-0-521-73435-6 - What Americans Build and Why: Psychological Perspectives

Ann Sloan Devlin

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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.

Ann Sloan Devlin is the May Buckley Sadowski '19 Professor of Psychology and college marshal at Connecticut College. She has taught at Connecticut College since 1973 and received the John S. King Faculty Teaching Award (2006) and the Student Government Association Excellence in Teaching Award (1991). In the spring of 2009, she taught at the Pantheon Institute in Rome in a Study Away Teach Away (SATA) program sponsored by Connecticut College. While in Rome, she was invited to present a seminar at La Sapienza (University of Rome). She is on the editorial review board of the journal *Environment and Behavior* and has been a board member and secretary of the Environmental Design Research Association. She is a Fellow of Division 34, Population and Environmental Psychology of the American Psychological Association. She is the author of two previous books: *Mind and Maze: Spatial Cognition and Environmental Behavior* (2001) and *Research Methods: Planning, Conducting, and Presenting Research* (2006). Her articles appear in journals such as *Environment and Behavior*, the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, and the *EDRA* (Environmental Design Research Association) *Proceedings*.

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For Sloan. Carpe diem!

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
1 The Landscape of Housing: Suburbia, New Urbanism, and McMansions	1
2 The Landscape of Health Care: High Tech and Humanistic	69
3 The Landscape of Schools: Big Schools, Small Schools	116
4 The Landscape of Work: Visible or Virtual?	171
5 The Landscape of Retail: Big Box and Main Street	233
<i>Closing Comments</i>	281
<i>Index</i>	285

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

LIST OF FIGURES

1.1	Riva del Garda, Italy	<i>page 17</i>
1.2	Celebration housing	31
1.3	McMansion	57
1.4	Villa at The Preserve	63
1.5	New London pop-up house	66
2.1	Office building of second oral surgeon	70
2.2	Bronson Hospital	87
2.3	Facility with highest judged care ratings	100
2.4	Facility with lowest judged care ratings	100
2.5	Unrenovated unit	104
2.6	Planetree unit	104
3.1	Interior, University Elementary School	117
3.2	Silfen Auditorium, Connecticut College	119
3.3	Charles Chu Reading Room in Shain Library	120
3.4	University of Michigan Law Library	121
3.5	DuBois Lab, Lokey Laboratory, Stanford University	133
3.6	Fitch High School	165
4.1	Facade of Sant' Agnese in Agone, Piazza Navona, Rome	172
4.2	Cubicle installation, Herman Miller Sales Office, Boston	180
4.3	Parking, Via S. Maria dell'Anima, Rome	206
5.1	Northland Center	236
5.2	McDonald's, Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, Milan	242
5.3	Pompeii "storefront"	263
5.4	The Commons and The Village, Garden City Center	270
5.5	Campo dei Fiori, Rome	275

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

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

¹ Sommer, R. (1980). *Farmers markets of America: A renaissance*. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, p. 8.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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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I owe Connecticut College a debt of gratitude for the semester sabbatical in 2007 during which this book was launched and for the study-abroad teaching experience in 2009 that propelled it to its finish. The interlibrary loan staff, headed by Emily Aylward at the College, does a tremendous job supporting faculty and student needs; without their help, this book could not have been written. A number of other librarians (information specialists) deserve special thanks. One of them is my sister, Elizabeth Sloan Smith, who on many occasions looked up information for me, as well as helped me take a number of photographs for the book, on the “fly.” For instance, she drove and I snapped photographs, or vice versa, of the elephant statues at the Northland Center. A responsive librarian from the Ann Arbor District Library reference staff answered my email query on whether it was a Sears or Montgomery Ward on Main Street in Ann Arbor during the 1950s (I was less than confident of my memory); her check of the 1952 city directory revealed that it was a Sears. My daughter Sloan also deserves a special thank-you for photographing the pods of the DuBois organic chemistry lab at Stanford. Tek-wah King of the Department of East Asian Language and Culture at Connecticut College graciously translated the Chinese characters in the “Medicine No Fakes” sign I describe in Chapter 2. I also want to thank the experts who shared their views on various aspects of the built environment: Marie Cox, Jennifer Gallagher, John Sloan, Robert Sloan, C. Wesley Greenleaf, Elizabeth Gianacoplos, Eric Ward, Ellen Bruce Keable, and Daniel Sargis.

At the Psychology Department of Connecticut College, my colleague Stuart Vyse was helpful and encouraging about this project, particularly in urging me to use my own “voice” and to incorporate personal anecdotes to illustrate the shapes of the built landscapes in this country.

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In Rome, my SATA (study away teach away) students could not have been a better group of travelers during our adventures in the eternal city. I had no idea how much that experience would mean to me, personally and professionally, and how much it would shape a number of chapters in this book. I also want to thank Jesse Smeal, the student services coordinator and onsite administrator of the Pantheon Institute. The institute was housed in a renovated convent (Sant' Agnese in Agone) overlooking the Piazza Navona, where we lived and worked. At La Sapienza (University of Rome), I was fortunate to be in contact with environmental psychologists Mirilia Bonnes and Marino Bonaiuto, who invited me to give a seminar at La Sapienza and shared with me a number of wonderful meals. I also want to thank Elena Bilotta and Giuseppe Tronu, two of the program's doctoral students, who extended their friendship to me. Also, to the familiar strangers pouring my cappuccinos at Tor Millina, my neighborhood café, thank you.

I would like to thank Simina Calin and her assistant Jeanie Lee of Cambridge University Press, who took on the task of bringing my manuscript to its publishable form. During the production phase, Eleanor Umali's help was invaluable. I also want to thank Eric Schwartz, now with Princeton University Press, who gave me the encouragement to move forward with the publication process. My thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers who responded positively to the draft of my first chapter on housing, as well as to my final manuscript. Finally, special thanks to Sloan and David, my fellow travelers on life's great adventure.