

ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY: A BASIS FOR PURCHASE ENVIRONMENT DESIGN

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In his classic "Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool" (1973-74), Philip Kotler lamented the lack of research into, and understanding of, consumer reactions towards environments. Perhaps this situation has endured because marketers lack a ready foundation for such analysis. Yet such a foundation is available within the field of Environmental Psychology. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the Environmental Psychology literature dealing specifically with human perceptions of environments.

Environmental Psychology (EP) is concerned with interactions between person and physical surroundings (Russell and Ward, 1982). EP does not claim that any psychological process is exclusively under its purview. Rather, quite like Consumer Psychology, it is a unique vantage point from which to view a wide spectrum of human behaviors, both physical and mental.

The major areas of research interest within EP may be thought of as falling into three categories: Operation, Evaluation and Orientation. Operation includes the processes by which the environment affects the person, as well as how the person impacts the environment. Evaluation refers to the individual's assessment of the environment either in aesthetic terms, or as a format for goal attainment. Orientation refers to such processes as the perception of where one is, and the determination of how to behave within that environment (Stokols, 1977).

Environmental Perception is a subcategory of Orientation research. Environmental perception researchers investigate those cognitive processes which convert raw sensory input into interpretations of where one is, and predictions concerning what to expect there. In particular, they focus upon those basic semantic dimensions which humans use to give meaning to their environments.

Hershberger (1972) produced a review of the early Environmental Perception literature. The eight semantic scale-based studies he discussed provided evidence for twenty different factors, or dimensions of perception. He named five of these twenty as "strong dimensions of architectural meaning" which were "well established". These five were: 1) Aesthetic, 2) Friendliness, 3) Organization, 4) Potency/Texture and 5) Space.

Results from ten post-Hershberger environmental perception studies lend strong support to the first three of Hershberger's five dimensions. All of the studies contain what might be labeled a Aesthetic dimension. The Friendliness and Organization dimensions are present in three studies each. At present, all three of these dimensions appear to be well supported. However, there is little agreement on the remaining dimensions. Why should this be the case? Among the explanations discussed in the literature are: 1) inadequate specification of the domain of stimuli, and 2) inadequate specification of the domain of responses.

It now remains for consumer researchers to extend this avenue of inquiry into the realm of purchase environment design. Two major questions would appear to dominate any such discussion. First is the fundamental perceptual issue involving dimensions of meaning: are the dimensions for purchase environments identical to those for other environments? Second is the psychophysical issue: how are physical aspects of store design linked to cognition, affect and intent?

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