

Social Science Notes

URBAN PLANNING

Billboards Neither Good Nor Bad

Removing billboards from the side of roads seems to have little effect for better or worse on human reactions to the environment, the National Academy of Sciences has been told.

According to a new method of measuring quality in visual surroundings, devised by Arthur D. Little, Inc. in San Francisco, people react to the total scene, not to specific parts of it. Consequently, current piecemeal beautification programs will probably do little to enhance the urban environment, vice president Cyril Herrmann reported.

Measures of pleasure and displeasure were taken from a group of people shown slides of urban commercial scenes and landscapes. Besides having subjects rate the scenes, the test revealed where they fixed their eyes. Recent studies indicate that eye pupil dilation is related to pleasure and constriction to displeasure.

Surprisingly, only a third of the people realized when billboards were removed from a scene, whether commercial or landscape. Fewer thought their absence changed the quality of the environment.

The single item most people noticed and disliked was utility lines, said Herrmann. The test suggests, however, that removing utility lines, plus billboards and all other signs from roadsides is not a good idea. Subjects liked the cleansed scenes no better than the original confusion.

Herrmann believes the research will eventually set guideposts for designing a pleasant urban environment.

GERONTOLOGY

Russian Methuselahs Exaggerated

Records of extreme old age in the Soviet Union are definitely inflated, sociologist Walter C. McKain of the University of Connecticut reports.

Dr. McKain, who recently spent six months in Russia, said Soviet researchers are making efforts to weed out the exaggerations and over the past eight years have cut their figures on centenarians from 28,000 to 22,000.

While in Russia, Dr. McKain visited a dozen centenarians to find out how their age escalates.

The older villager frequently does not know his true age and most of his contemporaries are dead. In time, "longevity becomes a matter of pride, not only for himself, but for the whole village," Dr. McKain reports in GERONTOLOGIST.

"Years are added to his true age so gradually and so comfortably that he really believes he is as old as everyone says."

The sociologist heard claims of relatives living to the ages of 128 and even 150 years.

U.S. figures are also being revised downward. Instead of the 10,326 centenarians reported in the 1960 census, the Social Security Administration now believes there were only 3,700.

HEREDITY

I.Q. Strongly Linked to Genes

Heredity is far more important than environment in determining intelligence, a Stanford University psycholo-

gist reported to the National Academy of Sciences meeting last week.

Dr. Arthur R. Jensen, from Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, based his conclusion on a new mathematical formula for deriving estimates of heritability. He applied this formula to past studies of identical and fraternal twins.

He told the Academy his results decidedly contradict current notions that environment is primarily responsible for intellectual differences among people.

Dr. Jensen also attacked the highly regarded Coleman Report on U.S. public schools released last fall. Dr. James S. Coleman of Johns Hopkins University directed a two-year, Federally-financed study of 645,000 students in 4,000 schools. His data, Dr. Jensen said, were based on intelligence tests, rather than achievement, and would thus give an inaccurate picture of how well the schools are doing their job.

School achievement is not strongly related to heredity, as is intelligence, said Dr. Jensen.

AVERSION THERAPY

Drug Addicts Get Shocked

An English hospital has plans for treating drug addicts with electric shock and horror pictures, a process called aversion therapy.

The idea is to train addicts to associate their drugs with a highly unpleasant experience.

Aversion therapy has been used with reported success on compulsive gamblers and sexual deviates both in the United States and in England. How much good it will do the addicts is unknown.

An experiment will first be conducted on volunteers from a psychiatric hospital in Birmingham.

While the heroin or cocaine is taking hold, doctors will administer 70-volt shocks and simultaneously show pictures of addicts in the worst stages of degradation.

HEARING

Defect Yields to Surgery

A method of diagnosing and correcting a particular hearing defect was reported to the American Acoustical Society in New York. The defect does not show up in conventional hearing tests, but once diagnosed, may be repaired by surgery.

Children afflicted with the problem—inability to recognize tones unless they are sounded for an abnormally long period—often have difficulty learning language. They hear short tones as scratchy noise.

The new test measures the time required for tonal recognition.

The three men who reported the work—Dr. Paul Boomsliker of the State University of New York in Albany, Warren Creel and surgeon Samuel R. Powers Jr., both of Albany Medical College—linked the defect with brain blood supply. A well-known operation used to repair damaged or pinched vertebral arteries appears to correct it, according to hearing tests on 57 persons who have had the operation.

Dr. Powers is now using the test to diagnose suspected disorders in blood supply to the lower brain where hearing nerve centers are located.