

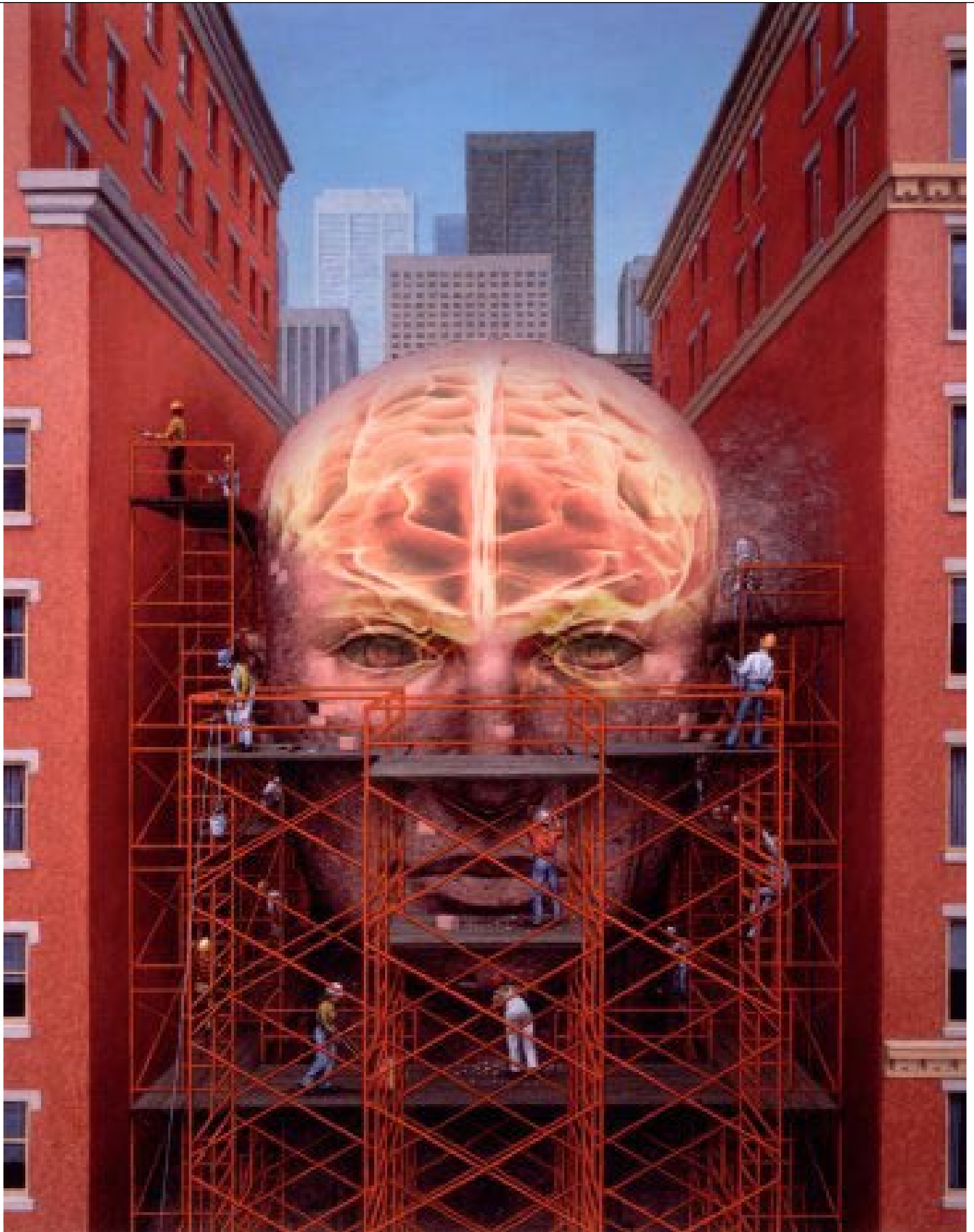


# Building Around the (Mind)

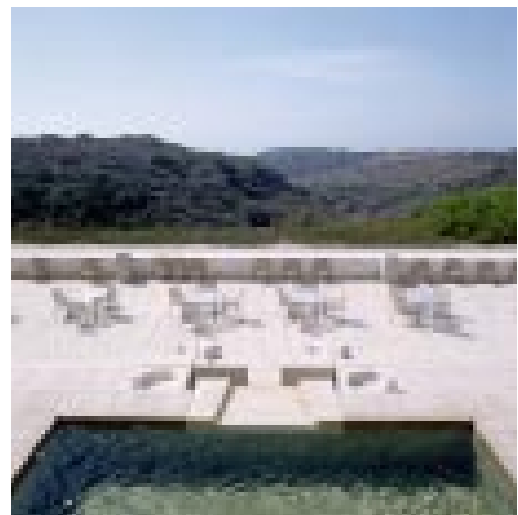
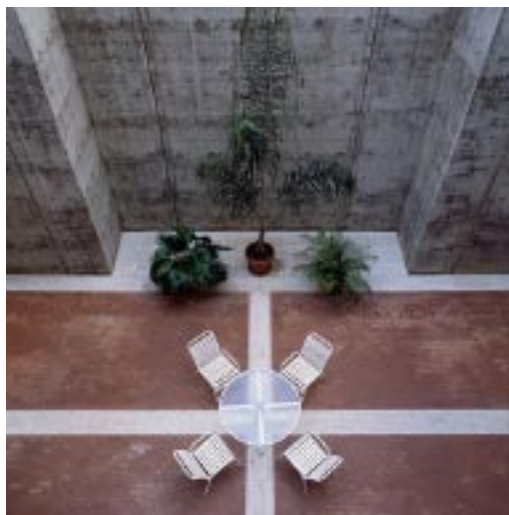
Brain research can help us craft spaces that relax, inspire, awaken, comfort and heal

**By Emily Anthes**

**I**n the 1950s prize-winning biologist and doctor Jonas Salk was working on a cure for polio in a dark basement laboratory in Pittsburgh. Progress was slow, so to clear his head, Salk traveled to Assisi, Italy, where he spent time in a 13th-century monastery, ambling amid its columns and cloistered courtyards. Suddenly, Salk found himself awash in new insights, including the one that would lead to his successful polio vaccine. Salk was convinced he had drawn his inspiration from the contemplative setting. He came to believe so strongly in architecture's ability to influence the mind that he teamed up with renowned architect Louis Kahn to build the Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif., as a scientific facility that would stimulate breakthroughs and encourage creativity.



## Higher ceilings encourage people to think freely, says one expert,



Architects have long intuited that the places we inhabit can affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. But now, half a century after Salk's inspiring excursion, behavioral scientists are giving these hunches an empirical basis. They are unearthing tantalizing clues about how to design spaces that promote creativity, keep students focused and alert, and lead to relaxation and social intimacy. Institutions such as the Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture in San Diego are encouraging interdisciplinary research into how a planned environment influences the mind, and some architecture

schools are now offering classes in introductory neuroscience.

Such efforts are already informing design, leading to cutting-edge projects, such as residences for seniors with dementia in which the building itself is part of the treatment [see box on page 00]. Similarly, the Kingsdale School in London was redesigned, with the help of psychologists, to promote social cohesion [see illustration on next page]; the new structure also includes elements that foster alertness and creativity. What is more, researchers are just getting started. "All this is in its infancy," says architect David Allison, who heads the Architecture + Health program at Clemson University. "But the emerging neuroscience research might give us even better insights into how the built environment impacts our health and well-being, how we perform in environments and how we feel in environments."

**Jonas Salk, inventor of the polio vaccine, hoped the expansive social spaces of his Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif., would inspire the scientists who worked there.**

### FAST FACTS

#### Creative Construction

**1»** Architects have long intuited that the places we inhabit can affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Now behavioral scientists are giving their hunches an empirical basis.

**2»** Scientists are unearthing tantalizing clues about how to design spaces that promote creativity, keep students focused and alert, and lead to relaxation and social intimacy. The results inform architectural and design decisions such as the height of ceilings, the view from windows, the shape of furniture and the type and intensity of lighting.

**3»** Such efforts are leading to cutting-edge projects such as residences for seniors with dementia in which the building itself is part of the treatment.

#### Higher Thought

Formal investigations into how humans interact with the built environment began in the 1950s, when several research groups analyzed how the design of hospitals, particularly psychiatric facilities, influenced patient behaviors and outcomes. In the 1960s and 1970s the field that became known as environmental psychology blossomed.

"There was a social conscience growing in architecture around that time," says John Zeisel, a Columbia University-trained sociologist who, as president of Hearthstone Alzheimer Care, specializes in the design of facilities for people who have dementia. Architects began to ask themselves, Ziesel adds, "What is there about people that we need to find out

## which may lead them to make more abstract connections.

about in order to build buildings that respond to people's needs?" The growth of the brain sciences in the late 20th century gave the field a new arsenal of technologies, tools and theories. Researchers began to consider "how can we utilize the rigorous methods of neuroscience and a deeper understanding of the brain to inform how we design," says Eve Edelstein, a visiting neuroscientist at the University of California, San Diego, and adjunct professor at the New School of Architecture and Design, also in San Diego.

Now research has emerged that could help illuminate Salk's observation that aspects of the physical environment can influence creativity. In 2007 Joan Meyers-Levy, a professor of marketing at the University of Minnesota, reported that the height of a room's ceiling affects how people think. She randomly assigned 100 people to a room with either an eight- or 10-foot ceiling and asked participants to group sports from a 10-item list into categories of their own choice. The people who completed the task in the room with taller ceilings came up with more abstract categories, such as "challenging" sports or sports they would like to play, than did those in rooms with shorter ceilings, who offered more concrete groupings such as the number of participants on a team. "Ceiling height affects the way you process information," Meyers-Levy says. "You're focusing on the specific details in the lower-ceiling condition."

Because Meyers-Levy's earlier work had indicated that elevated ceilings make people feel physically less constrained, the investigator posits that higher ceilings encourage people to think more freely, which may lead them to make more abstract connections. The sense of confinement prompted by low ceilings, on the other hand, may inspire a more detailed, statistical outlook—which might be preferable under some circumstances. "It very much depends on what kind of task you're doing," Meyers-Levy explains. "If you're in the operating room, maybe a low ceiling is better. You want the surgeon getting the details right." Similarly, paying bills might be most efficiently accomplished in a room with low ceilings, whereas producing great works of art might be more likely in a studio with loftier ones. How high the ceiling actually is, Meyers-Levy points out, is less important than how high it feels. "We think you can get these effects just by manipulating the perception of space," she says, by using light-

colored paint, for instance, or mirrors to make the room look more spacious.

### Natural Focus

In addition to ceiling height, the view afforded by a building may influence intellect—in particular, an occupant's ability to concentrate. Although gazing out a window suggests distraction, it turns out that views of natural settings, such as a garden, field or forest, actually improve focus. A study published in 2000 by environmental psychologist Nancy Wells, now at Cornell University, and her colleagues followed seven- to 12-year-old children before and after a family move. Wells



Ample daylight and greenery boost attentiveness and academic performance. The spacious courtyard of the Kingsdale School in London also encourages social interaction.

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and her team evaluated the panoramas from windows in each old and new home. They found that kids who experienced the greatest increase in greenness as a result of the move also made the most gains on a standard test of attention. (The scientists controlled for differences in housing quality, which turned out not to be associated with attention.) Another experiment demonstrated that college students with views of nature from their dorm rooms scored higher on measures of mental focus than did those who overlooked entirely man-made structures.

Green play space may be especially beneficial for students with attention disorders. Landscape architect and researcher William Sullivan of the University of Illinois and his colleagues studied 96 children with attention deficit disorder (ADD). The scientists asked parents to describe their children's ability to con-

concentrate—say, on homework or spoken directions—after the kids engaged in activities such as fishing, soccer and playing video games in which they were exposed to varying amounts of greenery. “The parents reported that their children’s ADD symptoms were least severe after they’d been in or observing green spaces,” says Sullivan, whose results were published in 2001.

Such effects may be the result of a restorative effect on the mind of gazing on natural scenes, according to an idea developed by psychologists Stephen Kaplan and Rachel Kaplan of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. By this theory, the tasks of the modern world can engender mental fatigue, whereas looking out at a natural setting is relatively effortless and can give the mind a much needed rest. “A number of studies have shown that when people look at nature views, whether they’re real or projected on a screen, their ability to focus improves,” Stephen Kaplan says.

Nature views may be more rejuvenating than urban scenes are, Sullivan adds, because humans have an innate tendency to respond positively toward nature—an explanation dubbed the biophilia hypothesis. “We evolved in an environment that predisposes us to function most effectively in green spaces,” Sullivan says. In a December 2008 paper in *Psychological Science*,

Stephen Kaplan also proposes that urban settings are too stimulating and that attending to them—with their traffic and crowds—requires more cognitive work than gazing at a grove of trees does.

Using nature to boost attention ought to pay off academically, and it seems to, according to a study that will be published in spring 2009 and that was led by C. Kenneth Tanner, head of the school design and planning laboratory at the University of Georgia. In their analysis of more than 10,000 fifth-grade students in 71 Georgia elementary schools, Tanner and his colleagues found that students in classrooms with unrestricted views of at least 50 feet outside the window, including gardens, mountains and other natural elements, had higher scores on tests of vocabulary, language arts and math than did students without such expansive vistas or whose classrooms primarily overlooked roads, parking lots and other urban fixtures.

### Seeing the Light

In addition to greenery, the natural world has something else to offer building occupants: light. Daylight synchronizes our sleep-wake cycles, or circadian rhythms, enabling us to stay alert during the day and to sleep at night. Nevertheless,

**“We evolved in an environment that predisposes us to function**



Buildings that figuratively bring the outside in, by providing views of nature, can improve their occupants’ ability to concentrate.

many institutional buildings are not designed to let in as much natural light as our minds and bodies need.

A lack of light can be a particular problem for schoolchildren. “You take a child who probably didn’t get enough rest, dump them off in front of a school where there’s very little natural light, and guess what? They have jet lag,” Tanner says. A 1992 study followed Swedish schoolchildren in four different classrooms for a year. The research showed that the kids in classrooms with the least daylight had disrupted levels of cortisol, a hormone that is regulated by the body’s circadian rhythms.

Adequate sunlight has also been shown to improve student outcomes. In 1999 the Heschong Mahone Group, a consulting group based in California that specializes in building



**Daylight calibrates our sleep-wake cycle, thereby affecting our body and mind. One study suggests that the more natural light a classroom has, the faster the academic progress of the students in it.**

ruptions. Providing bright daytime light, the researchers believe, could have helped restore their proper rhythms and thus improved overall brain function.

The wavelength of light is also crucial. Our circadian systems are primarily regulated by short-wavelength blue light; the photoreceptors that feed back to the suprachiasmatic nucleus, a part of the hypothalamus that regulates our daily rhythms, relay the most nerve impulses to the brain when they detect blue light. This short-wavelength light—present in sunlight—lets the brain and body know it is daytime. (In con-

## most effectively in green spaces,” says one architect.

energy-efficient structures, collected scores on standardized tests of math and reading for more than 21,000 elementary school students in three school districts in three states: California, Washington and Colorado. Using photographs, architectural plans and in-person visits, the researchers rated the amount of daylight available in each of more than 2,000 classrooms on a scale of 0 to 5. In one school district—Capistrano, Calif.—students in the sunniest classrooms advanced 26 percent faster in reading and 20 percent faster in math in one year than did those with the least daylight in their classrooms. In the other two districts, ample light boosted scores between 7 and 18 percent.

Retirement homes can also be too dark to keep circadian clocks ticking away normally. In a study published in 2008 neuroscientist Rixt F. Riemersma-van der Lek of the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience and her colleagues randomly selected six of 12 assisted-living facilities in Holland to have supplemental lighting installed, bringing the luminosity to approximately 1,000 lux; the other six provided dimmer lighting of around 300 lux. On tests taken at six-month intervals over three and a half years, the residents of the more brightly lit buildings showed 5 percent less cognitive decline than occupants of the six darker buildings did. (The additional lighting also reduced symptoms of depression by 19 percent.) Other studies show that circadian rhythms keep the brain functioning optimally by calibrating hormone levels and metabolic rate, for example. Elderly people—especially those with dementia—often have circadian dis-

trast, our rods and cones, which are responsible for vision, fire maximally when exposed to green or yellow-green light.)

Researchers recommend the use of blue LEDs and full-spectrum fluorescent lights in buildings during the day; both have enough blue light to trigger the circadian system and keep occupants awake and alert. After dark, however, buildings could switch to lamps and fixtures with longer-wavelength bulbs, which are less likely to emit light detected by the circadian system and interfere with sleep at night. “If you can give people a lighting scheme where they can differentiate between day and night, that would be an important architectural decision,” says Mariana Figueiro, program director of the Lighting Research Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

### A Room to Relax

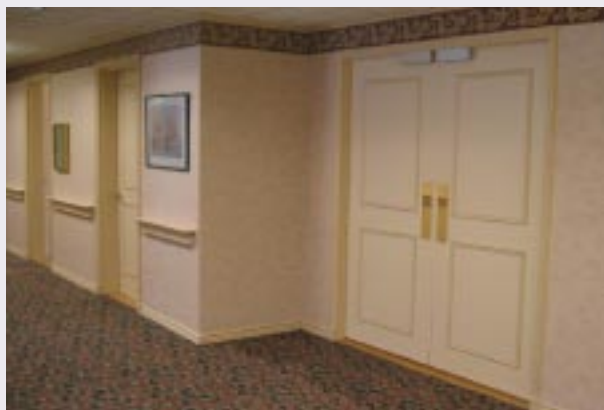
Although bright light might boost cognition, recent work suggests it counteracts relaxation and openness—effects that might be more important than alertness in some settings. In a 2006 study counselors interviewed 80 university students in-

### (The Author)

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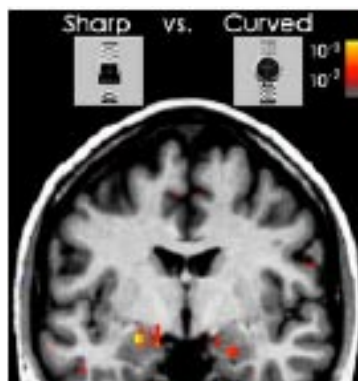
## No Exit

The residences of people who suffer from dementia may have special architectural requirements. For example, seniors with cognitive impairments often try to leave their assisted living facilities, ending up lost, cold or worse. One surprisingly straightforward solution to this problem: disguising the exits. Placing doors to the outside along—instead of at the end of—hallways, shrinking the size of the “exit” sign, covering the doorknobs with cloth and making the doors solid (with no windows to the outdoors) can reduce residents’ attempts to leave. In 2003 John Zeisel, a sociologist and president and co-founder of Hearthstone Alzheimer Care, whose facilities are located in Massachusetts and New York, studied a total of 427 residents at 15 different special care units for people with Alzheimer’s disease. Zeisel and his colleagues correlated the residents’ psychological functioning (as measured by a number of standardized assessments) with various features of the physical environments in which they lived. Among other findings, the researchers revealed that those who lived in facilities with well-disguised exits had fewer symptoms of depression than did residents of homes with more prominent exit doors. Zeisel speculates that in institutions whose exit doors are inconspicuous, staff members are less worried about patient safety and give residents more freedom and independence, thereby boosting their moods.



Disguising exit doors such as these in homes for people with Alzheimer’s disease may improve the mood of the residents.

Exit camouflage is just one environmental intervention that could help senior citizens with dementia, Zeisel says. For instance, memory-impaired patients have trouble forming cognitive maps of their environments, so the Hearthstone facilities make liberal use of landmarks, posting a variety of photographs in the hallways to help patients find their way. And helping them navigate the corridors can, in turn, reduce their distress, aggression and anxiety, according to Zeisel. “A large number of the so-called symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease are a result of environmental factors that are not well suited to these people’s needs,” he maintains. —E.A.



Viewing sofas and other objects with sharp corners produces greater activation (red and yellow patches) of the amygdala, a brain area involved in fear and arousal, than does looking at furniture with curved contours. The heightened activity may underlie a sense of danger, which people associate with sharp angles. Smooth shapes are more soothing, studies hint.

dividually in either a dim or a brightly lit counseling room. The students then completed a questionnaire about their reactions to the interview. The students questioned in the dim room felt more relaxed, viewed the counselor more positively and shared more information about themselves than those counseled in the brighter room did. The findings suggest that dim light helps people to loosen up. If that is true generally, keeping the light low during dinner or at parties could foster relaxation and intimacy.

A room’s contents can be similarly soothing—or the opposite. Neuroscientist Moshe Bar of Harvard Medical School and Maital Neta, then his research assistant, showed subjects photographs of various versions of neutral objects, such as sofas and watches. The examples of each item were identical except that some had curved or rounded edges, whereas others had sharp, squared-off perimeters. When asked to make snap judgments about these objects, subjects significantly preferred those with curves. Bar speculates that this preference exists because we associate sharp angles with danger. (The brain may sense a greater hazard, for instance, from a cave where jagged rocks protrude from the walls than from one in which rounded rocks do the same.) “Maybe sharp contours are coded in our brains as potential threats,” Bar says.

Bar provided some support for this theory in a 2007 study in which subjects again viewed a series of neutral objects—this time while their brains were scanned using functional magnetic resonance imaging. Bar found that the amygdala, which is involved in fear processing and emotional arousal, was more active when people were looking at objects with sharp angles. “The underpinnings are really deep in our brain,” Bar explains. “Very basic visual properties convey to us some higher-level information such as ‘Red alert!’ or ‘Relax, it’s all smooth; there’s no threat in the area.’” Bar acknowledges that an object’s contour is not the only element that informs our aesthetic preferences, and his research is still in its early stages. But all other things being equal, filling a living room or waiting room with furniture that has rounded or curved edges could help visitors unwind.

Furniture choices can also influence human interaction.

Some of the earliest environmental psychology research focused on seating plans in residential health care facilities; scientists discovered that the common practice of placing chairs along the walls of resident day rooms or lounges actually prevented socializing. A better plan to encourage interaction, researchers found, is organizing furniture in small groupings throughout the room. A 1999 study by psychologists from the Otto-von-Guericke University of Magdeburg in Germany and Uppsala University in Sweden examined seating in a different setting. Over eight weeks and more than 50 lessons, the researchers rotated a class of fourth-grade students between two seating arrangements: rows of desks and a semicircle of desks around the teacher. The semicircle configuration increased student participation, boosting the number of questions pupils asked. Other studies suggest that putting desks in rows encourages students to work independently and improves classroom behavior.

Carpeting can also grease the social wheels. In hospitals, carpet increases the amount of time patients' friends and families spend visiting, according to a 2000 study led by health care design expert Debra Harris, now president and CEO of RAD Consultants in Austin. Such social support may ultimately speed healing. Of course, carpeting is much harder to clean than traditional hospital flooring—and may present a health hazard in some settings—so it may not be appropriate for places such as an emergency room, where there is high patient turnover and plenty of mess. But rooms, buildings or wards that are home to long-term patients, such as assisted living facilities, may benefit from carpets.

So far scientists have focused mainly on public buildings, such as hospitals, schools and stores. Thus, a homeowner interested in boosting his or her mind through design must do some extrapolating. "We have a very limited number of studies, so we're almost looking at the problem through a straw," Clemson's Allison says. "Now we need to find more general patterns. How do you take answers to very specific questions and make broad generalized use of them? That's what we're all struggling with."

The struggle should pay off, experts believe, because when designers fabricate buildings with the mind in mind, the occupants benefit. Well-designed special care units for Alzheimer's patients reduced anxiety, aggression, social withdrawal, depression and psychosis, according to a 2003 study by Zeisel and his colleagues. And school design can account for be-



tween 10 and 15 percent of variation in elementary school students' scores on a standardized test of reading and math skills, suggests a 2001 report by investigators at the University of Georgia.

"Because of advances in neuroscience, we can begin measuring the effects of the environment at a finer level of detail than we have before," U.C.S.D.'s Edelstein says. "We can understand the environment better, we can understand our responses better, and we can correlate them to the outcomes. I just get chills when I think about it." **M**

### (Further Reading)

- ◆ **Health Care Environments and Patient Outcomes: A Review of the Literature.** Ann Sloan Devlin and Allison B. Arneill in *Environment and Behavior*, Vol. 35, No. 5, pages 665–694; September 2003.
- ◆ **The Impact of School Environments: A Literature Review.** Steve Higgins et al. for the Design Council; February 18, 2005. Available at [www.designcouncil.org.uk/en/Design-Council/3/Publications/The-Impact-of-School-Learning-Environments](http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/en/Design-Council/3/Publications/The-Impact-of-School-Learning-Environments)
- ◆ **Is There a Psychologist in the Building?** Christian Jarrett in *The Psychologist*, Vol. 19, No. 10, pages 592–594; October 2006.
- ◆ **Neuroscience and Architecture: Seeking Common Ground.** Esther M. Sternberg and Matthew A. Wilson in *Cell*, Vol. 127, No. 2, pages 239–242; October 20, 2006.
- ◆ **Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture:** [www.anfarch.org](http://www.anfarch.org)