

CHAPTER 4

From Gans to Coleman to the
Social Model of Disability:
physical environmental determinism
revisited

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Background

The aim of this chapter is to discuss ideas about housing environments and their impact on people's lives, and to consider relationships with the social model. The writer does not claim any particular knowledge about impairment or disability, but approaches the topic from the perspective of someone studying and teaching housing. There is, however, a personal element behind this chapter. It reflects stages in the development of my thinking about the environments in which people live; from the time when I was a student of town planning (thirty-five years ago), to the present, when I work in a social policy framework, just a few doors away from members of the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds. There is therefore a slow (and at present unfinished) learning process or intellectual journey underpinning my discussion, so I hope readers will forgive the personal tone the chapter sometimes has.

So much has been written about the social model that it seems unlikely that especially unexpected insights are 'waiting around the corner' from people in fields like housing and planning. This is not to deny the value of deepening or extending our understanding of how things work, or of clarifying connections and qualifying our interpretations. It is just to acknowledge that academics are good at 're-inventing the wheel', and to alert readers that the novelty of the present chapter lies more in its focus than in any claim to a new contribution to social model debates. In earlier work I attempted an overview of the UK housing and disability field (alongside ethnicity and gender), placed within quite a complex theoretical account of 'difference within difference', 'structure' and 'agency' (Harrison with Davis 2001). That

analysis, however, did not get very far into questions about 'residence environments' as such, and accepted the significance of physical barriers without much amplification or qualification. This chapter is a tentative effort to engage more directly with the question of environments and causation.

An approach resting on *environmental determinism* implies that features of the environment tend to have a determining influence on outcomes of various kinds. For most of the present chapter this thinking is being defined fairly narrowly, and refers to what is in effect physical (or perhaps 'architectural' or 'design') determinism, as applied to environments where people live. It may be assumed by physical environmental determinists that there is a substantial impact on people arising from the physical qualities of their dwellings and immediate neighbourhood surroundings; these qualities may be assumed to influence behaviour, health, satisfaction or well-being. The connection with disability issues is evident, given the significance of barriers in terms of physical problems of access and use. Thus it might be felt that there is good fit between physical environmental determinism and the social model of disability, insofar as the house, its steps and stairs, its doorways, and the lack of space seem to 'create disability' (Oldman and Beresford 2000: 430). Despite the force of this argument, we need to consider how far physical features actually do have determining effects, or are independently crucial in causation. It is important that housing researchers, policy makers and design practitioners do not over-emphasise technical solutions developed by looking at housing and physical planning in isolation. It is worth remembering that 'housing' may be a potential component in disabling or enabling environments not only through its physical characteristics, but also through its administration, services and finance (see Harrison with Davis 2001: chapter 5).

Gans and Coleman: from enlightenment to pseudo-science?

Physical environmental determinism has had a long history as a strand within the thinking of town and country planners, housing providers and politicians. For concerned professionals or politicians it has often seemed self-evident that if dwellings and surrounding neighbourhoods were changed, this would alter people's lives substantially, on dimensions ranging from health to interactions with neighbours. What were perceived in any particular period as higher physical standards, superior designs and improved environments could be presented as major contributions to social advancement, while concepts of housing and environmental needs could be thought of primarily in physical terms. Desirable though improved physical housing standards can be, there

have been potential problems with this approach.

One difficulty is that evidence for direct positive effects from physical changes has sometimes been difficult to come by, contested, or potentially complicated by the presence of other causative factors, such as changes in income (Harrison *forthcoming*). Histories suggest that certain programmes to improve matters via physical strategies actually had more significant negative than positive results, especially once the worst housing structures and health problems had been dealt with. Examples may be found in the later periods of large-scale slum clearance (Dennis 1970; McKie 1971), and the high-rise council housing era in Britain (for a general introduction to multi-storey housing and its prospects, see Towers 2000). It is sometimes assumed that these instances proved the failure of centrally-inspired interventionist programmes from the 1940s onwards, but the 'prefabs' experience suggests that failure was not inherent in intervention and central planning (Vale 1995; Stevenson 2003). Rather, what proved crucial was probably the gap between assumptions and realities as far as the social and economic effects of some of the physical changes were concerned.

A second problem persists as a general issue when physical standards for quality and design are being planned or deployed in the cause of meeting needs. The development and implementation of physical arrangements tends to involve formulation of standards, interpretation or implementation by experts, professionals, bureaucrats or other influential decision-makers. Environmentally deterministic ideas can be embedded in the understandings that the experts have of their own roles, and serve as implicit foundations for assumptions that might not stand up well if tested against real households. Standards for physical environments have been a province for experts acting as 'guardians' of quality, preservation or improvement, and a belief in the primacy of the physical sometimes generated arguments which look archaic today. Some past claims went far beyond a practical knowledge of materials, design and safety, or the boundaries of regulating public health. Assertions about aesthetic judgements, for instance, might appear in defence of new proposals, existing treasured buildings, or precious rural environments. Here is an example from a town and country planning professionals' gathering of 1959. The speaker is addressing the planning and protection of physical environments, and demonstrates paternalism and moral righteousness:

To be rational was to recognize that a general and popular concept might be full of sin and that it should be disregarded

...The obvious guide in all things was knowledge of accepted, beautiful artifacts. In that the dictum of the expert must be accepted, and the advice of acknowledged experts should guide us in forming our surroundings (cited in Harrison 1975: 262).

Standpoints of this kind reflected faith in expertise or authority citing concepts of the public interest. Action could be cast in terms of a battle against irrational lay opinions, unacceptable behavioural practices, or commercialism and the market.

In any event, designs, plans and standards for housing and neighbourhoods might be focussed in professional practice on physical targets, without necessarily always paying substantial regard to specific occupiers or factors shaping individual notions of 'home' and housing needs. This did not make the specific physical design goals of professionals necessarily 'wrong' in any general sense, and in any case the ideas frequently shared an agenda with other ways of looking at progress and needs (such as concerns about housing costs and affordability). Nonetheless, claims about environmental effects and benefits deserved to be scrutinised, tested, modified and qualified, with more space being made for considering the 'human agent'.

Herbert Gans

The 1960s and 1970s saw extensive debates about planning, its problems and its failings. The claims and activities of professionals were scrutinised and challenged (see, for instance, Dennis 1970: 182-345, on slum clearance practices), while the issue of participation was raised not only by critics in Britain and the USA but also by UK government itself (Arnstein 1969; Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Scottish Development Department and Welsh Office 1969; Department of the Environment and Welsh Office 1973). A particularly important contributor whose work was available in the debates of the late 1960s was the sociologist Herbert Gans. He had an impressive record of detailed empirical investigations in the USA (see Gans 1962, 1967), as well as direct commentary on planning (for instance, Gans 1969). One essay included in his book *People and Plans* was especially useful, for in it he sketched the difference between a 'potential' and an 'effective' environment (Gans 1968: 4-11). If writing a piece of similar purposes today we would give more attention to gender, age and disability than was given then, but the essay (apparently prepared initially in 1958) nonetheless retains much value even after several decades. His basic conception was that the physical environment was relevant to behaviour insofar as it affected the social system and culture of the people involved

or as it was taken up into their social system. Between the physical environment and empirically observable human behaviour there existed a 'social system and a set of cultural norms' which defined and evaluated 'portions of the physical environment relevant to the lives of people involved' (Gans 1968: 5), and structured the way people would use and react to this environment in their daily lives. Referring to an example of planning for a park, Gans says that planners might believe that creating a park would provide pleasure, aesthetic satisfaction and better health, through the exposure to fresh air, sunlight and grass. It is not the park alone, however, but 'the functions and meanings which the park has for the people who are exposed to it' that affect the achievement or non-achievement of the planners' aims (1968: 6).

The passing of time has actually made this park example more instructive than in 1968. In the UK today we might be more wary than once we were about creating easily-accessible public open space. Sadly, questions could be asked about who would maintain it, and whether it would become a dumping ground for rubbish, or a depository for needles or burned-out vehicles. Some might see such spaces as areas of danger, depending upon the persons frequenting them. Gans wrote that the park proposed by the planners was only a potential environment. The social system and culture of those who use it determine to what extent the park becomes an effective environment. We can extend this argument readily to housing design, estate planning and internal dwelling features, with implications for how we think about adaptations and improvements. With respect to the influence of physical factors on behaviour, what Gans then referred to as a 'man-made artifact' is a potential environment, and the conception of that artifact in the culture is the effective environment. The effective environment, he says, may thus be defined as 'that version of the potential environment that is manifestly or latently adopted by users' (1968: 6).

This piece by Gans became a reference point for my thinking about causation and environments, and proved a valued aid when teaching students over many years. Of course many subsequent writers made contributions touching on similar or adjacent intellectual territory.

Alice Coleman

It is probable that crude forms of physical environmental determinism had been modified or even discredited in some spheres of professional debate in Britain by the end of the 1970s, although it would require documentary research to test this. It seemed to me at the time that at the very least the intellectual debate had altered, with a measure of

enlightened recognition that causation is a complex matter, and with less faith in professionals. A physical environmental determinist perspective clearly had something to contribute for specific issues such as the impact of dangerous materials in housing, but grandiose claims seemed unlikely to make much headway.

In 1985, however, Alice Coleman's *Utopia on Trial* appeared. She reported a heavily funded research project aimed at studying design and layout in mass housing schemes, and mapping and testing these to see which aspects were associated with 'various lapses in civilised behaviour'. These lapses were a somewhat selective combination; litter-dropping, graffiti-scrawling, vandalism, pollution by excrement, and 'family breakdown leading to children being placed in care' (1985: 2). Designs were treated as having a 'disadvantaging effect', and a 'design disadvantage score' was obtained for each block of flats (1985: 3, 5, 123, 126). Coleman claimed to be placing what she referred to as the planned 'Utopia', the 'ideal environment', on trial (1985: 3), and she pointed to design features being responsible for 'many aspects of social decline' (1985: 173). Her way forward revolved around design modification, which was held relevant to everything from levels of litter to reduction in crime (1985: 5). The project was large, involving a team of up to six people over five years (five being credited as supporting contributors on the title page), and had the 'generous financial support' of the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust (1985: vii).

Although there was a stress on the 'scientific' nature of this enterprise, it was well received neither by some scholarly reviewers, nor apparently by departmental civil servants (see for instance, Hillier 1986; Spicker 1987; also Coleman 1985: 181). Leaving aside doubts about the statistical analyses, problems of moving from association to causation, and the issue of how difficult it is to assemble any uncontested set of measures or indicators of 'social malaise', the project was in any case open to challenge at the conceptual level for its limited coverage of potential key causative variables. A critic could argue that Coleman undervalued many social and economic variables which might create or contribute to social problems, behavioural patterns or tensions on estates, highlighting instead housing and estate design. We find little from her about youth cultures, family structures and histories, levels and sources of income, debts and living costs, ethnic relations, or policing practices. When social factors are referred to, it is primarily in relation to her selective framework of indicators (noted above), and the discussion is narrow. Thus, while poverty is mentioned, a short analysis diminishes its role as a causative issue in estate life or in what she refers to as

'social breakdown' (see Coleman 1985: 83, 85, 86, 172; cf Spicker 1987). An unusual argument is developed to intimate that perhaps design may be an important factor in causing unemployment, rather than unemployment itself being a potential major cause of problems on estates (Coleman 1985: 86-87). Although Coleman avoids commitment to being an environmental determinist (see 1985: 5, 19-20, 25, etc.), there is plenty to indicate her belief that planning, layout, design and physical features are likely to have direct and very important effects on behaviour.

The paperback version of *Utopia on Trial* featured ringing endorsements from the *Daily Mail*, *Mirror*, *Sunday Times*, *New Society*, and *London Standard*. The well known architectural commentator Patrick Nuttgens was reported saying that she had 'done a public service', since 'It won't do ever again for academic sociologists to say that architecture does not affect people's behaviour' (Coleman 1985: front inner page). The book went to a second edition in 1990, and a new preface noted that a large sum had now been provided by central government to support systematic trials of Coleman's physical solutions to housing design faults in selected estates (Coleman 1990: ix). Apparently, Coleman's ideas had found much favour with Thatcher's government, and – it is said – with the prime minister herself. Having criticised the mass housing enterprises of post-war reformers (where there were indeed things to learn from the overoptimistic assumptions and false hopes for social advance), Coleman highlighted a similar path by elevating design as a means of social benefit. She seems to have been engaging, like those post-war designers but on a much smaller scale, in social engineering built upon physical foundations. This is not to say that she lacked concepts about the social features of estate life. Pejorative and pathologising remarks indicate moral perspectives and firm feelings about social order and control. This is the only time when I have noticed the word 'sluts' used judgementally by someone setting out their stall as a scholar:

... at the other end there are a few who will always be sluts or criminals, even in ideal conditions (Coleman 1985: 20) ... Living in a high-rise block does not force all its inhabitants to become criminals ... it puts temptation in their way and makes it probable that some of the weaker brethren will succumb (p. 22).

To the present writer, Coleman's work was a step backwards. Though formulated nearly thirty years earlier, the ideas of Gans seemed infinitely more appreciative of the contingent nature of physical environmental

effects on behaviour and on satisfactions.

Partly in response to the Coleman debate, I began reformulating my own thoughts in terms of intervening variables, building on Gans. It seemed reasonable to conceive of effects from physical environments being significant under some economic conditions, in the context of some health conditions, given certain social networks and interactions, and so forth. I envisaged an array of intervening or 'confounding' factors operating alongside or 'between' the physical environment and any specific effects it might have, and activating, modifying, nullifying or amplifying those effects. Thus nothing much could be 'taken as given' about the impact of most physical features of a local environment without knowing quite a lot about the people living there, and the impact of other factors upon them. There would be exceptions, but generally these would be for relatively limited or extreme kinds of cases (such as dangerous building materials or services).

Environmental determinism and the social model of disability

My thinking began to shift as I encountered social model ideas through Leeds colleagues in the late 1990s. The argument that disablement is brought about through physical environmental as well as socio-economic barriers is persuasive. I therefore wondered whether I had been wrong about how to evaluate physical factors. My initial response involved ideas about the potentially determining but varying significance of physical barriers, with their impact perhaps conditioned by some continuum of 'vulnerability', reflecting differences relating to age, gender, illness and impairment. This formulation, however, seemed to take me in the direction of a rather more deterministic model than before, perhaps open to challenge on the grounds that it did not build in individuals' diversity or capacities for action.

Agency and structure

To avoid an over-deterministic account I needed to include human agency, but felt that this in turn would gain from a consideration of relationships with 'structural' factors. This is because even though we cannot fully assess the impact of barriers until we know about people's resources and actions, individuals do not think and act in a vacuum. One way forward seemed to be to start with the character of 'environment' in its broadest sense, and the contributions agency makes to it, rather than with intervening variables or barriers as such.

In general terms 'structure' can be treated as being about the resources and environments (socio-economic, political, and to some

extent physical) that come to us from the past, and help condition our choices and opportunities in the present. This does not mean that what we can think of as structural factors determine events, but that they set the stage and scenery, provide a range of possible texts and performance traditions, and lay out suits and props for the actors, opening up opportunities as well as posing constraints. Physical environments are part of the heritage that we all encounter, and part of the stage on which we move, but these environmental features take on their full meanings and significance to some extent in combination with other kinds of resources and other elements of the broader environment. At the same time actors are not necessarily inert receivers of environment in any of its manifestations, social, economic or physical. Not only can 'agency' imply resistance, subversion, collaboration, challenge, construction, and a myriad of other effects, but structural factors themselves may be influenced by interaction with agency and are manifested through it. People clearly have important effects now and for those who come after them. Social, economic and physical environments are shaped and re-shaped over time, as are the sets of ideas that we absorb or invoke when we discuss, evaluate or write about them.

How does this approach to environment relate to the social model? Two benefits of the social model are its clear recognition of the 'big picture' of constraints and practices, and its capacity to inform broader accounts highlighting structure. At the same time agency can be catered for particularly via focussing on mobilisation and resistance, as well as in terms of identifiable human contributions in processes that are oppressive. We need to add to this, however, that structural factors may facilitate and resource people as well as hinder them, and that agency is extensively involved beyond its manifestations in resistance, struggle or domination (for several manifestations of agency in housing see Harrison with Davis 2001: 41-42). Amongst other things, agency may encompass contributions to receiving, interpreting and shaping the environments into which we are cast, building on opportunities as well as facing obstacles, and (for present purposes) constructing and developing the meanings of home and locality.

As the flaws in physical environmental determinism suggest, when we consider barriers, constraints and opportunities in specific policy fields, people's perspectives and active roles need to be kept in mind. This may apply for many kinds of 'environmental' factors (including socioeconomic ones and those in the realm of ideas). This is despite the fact that certain practices and forces potentially contribute so strongly to regulating everyone's lives that the scope for substantially subverting or avoiding

them may be limited in the short-run.

The inter-meshing of physical, social and economic environmental factors

Another strength of the social model (and of disability studies) is a potential for integrated approaches to the various aspects of environment and disablement that people face. There is a good fit here with seeing 'the home' as much more than a physical object, with what has already been said above about the limitations of physically-focussed assumptions about causation, and with concepts of 'environments' implicit in notions of structural factors. A holistic approach to neighbourhood and residential environments perhaps might better reflect what disabled people have already understood about the social model, and the simultaneous and interlocking effects for any household of physical, social and economic barriers and resources in specific localities.

This implies being cautious in two ways. Although it is useful to highlight particular physical environmental barriers and possibilities for improvement, this should not lead into disaggregating aspects of environment in a formulaic way that suits the divisions of professional expertise, or follows the demarcations of academic preoccupations and 'disciplines'. The physical component of the barriers envisaged through the social model is not necessarily an uncontested or separable matter for debate, even if at first glance we might have considered the impact of the built environment a relatively non-controversial element within a social model approach. In addition, at a practical level it would be unfortunate if design, housing and planning practitioners and researchers were to focus on classifications, categorisations, measurement, design methods and technological advances without a full regard for the ways in which physical features are actually 'received' by housing consumers. People's various resources and their specific capacities to develop, cope and adapt may affect the relative importance they place upon the detailed design of some physical features. (For further insights, in respect of visually impaired children, see: Allen, Milner and Price 2002: note p. 12; and JRF 2002: 1).

An unfinished journey

When reviewing the impact of physical factors, we need reasonably informed perspectives on the nature, forging and development of the broader environment of home and residence, and the wider meanings of housing 'quality'. Ideas about both agency and structure can be kept in mind when we analyse these things. For instance, we might try to

distinguish between potential effects derived initially from 'external' forces (longstanding low levels of investment in services, low incomes in older age, racialisation processes, persistent barriers in labour markets, etc.), and those arising from current activities and preferences of local people. Although a little mechanical, this might facilitate an agency/structure type of discussion of environmental effects, interactions and contingencies, at the level of locality and dwellings, and the placing of physical design features in relation to this.

As a start towards a better account, I have recently begun trying to use selected secondary sources (books, studies, etc.) to help me to summarise the key types of social, economic or behavioural factors that constitute important features helping shape residence experiences (or what the environment of the home and neighbourhood might mean to residents), and to locate physical environment features in relation to this array. Socioeconomic factors in the environment may be highly significant in influencing the 'realisation' of the home. Leaving aside the physical qualities of the dwelling, an analysis of factors which might influence residents' perceptions of housing and locality would be likely to include (amongst others): general socio-economic and demographic conditions and trends affecting neighbourhoods; the capacity of households to exert control over their housing (and meet its costs); institutional practices; crime and neighbour nuisance; the histories of people's individual and collective activities, strategies, or investments, and the kinds and levels of social organisation and inter-personal interactions that have developed related to the neighbourhood and homes; the composition and features of households in terms of numbers, age, gender, ethnicity, impairment, chronic illness, or sexual orientation; the availability of and interactions with particular support personnel, assistants, advocates, kin, or peer group members; the relative significance of the dwelling in terms of daily time spent there; effects of hostilities locally to those who are perceived as 'different'; access to (and quality of) facilities such as public transport, schools, and shops; and intrusive or hazardous activities such as heavy or unpredictable traffic movements (for a more extensive discussion see Harrison *forthcoming*).

Policy issues

Whether a practitioner is designing for more comfortable living, for better access, or for 'smart home' technology, it may be unwelcome to be reminded that favourite professional ideas do not necessarily readily translate into an improved life for residents. The best way forward for housing, however, may not necessarily be to focus on a physical design

solution or quality standard, and investing in the physical attributes of the home need not always be the most helpful way to spend money. In an ideal world, improving housing environments to 'facilitate everyday living' (Peace and Holland 2001: 14) would involve tackling numerous dimensions of 'environment', including not only physical features and equipment, but also funds, costs, or the attitudes of professionals that might be affecting the management and use of the dwellings.

This raises questions about the campaigns and policies to raise physical environmental quality standards for housing which have been so important from the nineteenth century onwards, and which have been significant recently for disabled people's access. Furthermore, where does it leave reformers' ideas about lifetime, inter-generational or flexibly-planned homes?

An initial answer might be to say that the benefits of higher standards are likely to outweigh any potential costs (such as higher building and development costs), and that those benefits are readily demonstrable for large numbers of people. There will also be future gains from preventative strategies such as creating more adaptable homes. Thus real benefits can be obtained from better physical standards and designs. Tests, reassurance or confirmation of this might be sought by more frequent research on the outcomes of improvements, fuller monitoring of costs and benefits, feedback from 'users' after the event, and more solid consultations beforehand. From a planner's point of view, facilities should be made as far as possible satisfactory in terms of the frames of reference of both the planner and the users (cf Gans 1968: 8), while modest approaches to how people's lives can be improved might cast the designer or planner more often as negotiator, investigator, advocate and facilitator.

Another way forward would be to develop more holistic strategies, placing physical improvements within a broader package, or making tradeoffs between one kind of expenditure and another, even if retaining protective base-line physical standards to safeguard public health. Unfortunately, we do not live in a world where all the desirable policy options are readily available as this would require. For instance, although a particular older person might prefer a substantially increased state pension or a reduction in robberies and burglaries to the improvement of the neighbourhood physical environment, no such choice is ever likely to be on offer. Large inequalities in resources and power are at the heart of many unsatisfactory home circumstances, but politicians do not seem likely to take these on.

I will conclude, therefore, with a possible paradox about policy choices: physical policies may be desirable even though they are not necessarily the best route forward in terms of principles or spending. It is plausible to argue that physical solutions have a lot to offer reformers politically, despite doubts about environmental determinism and uncertainties about gains made for individual households. In today's Britain it may be easier to secure ongoing and extensive support for improved mandatory physical housing standards than it is to get agreement and continuity for financial support for other ways of improving people's lives. A better physical environment to some extent can be argued for independently of debates about redistribution and taxation, as well as opening the possibility of rights claims around concepts of fairness and equality of access. Perhaps focussing on improved universalistic physical standards may have political advantages (by contrast with other levers) for people who are actively pressing for more equality. Indeed, more lasting gains might be secured by obtaining environmental rights in the physical environment than by seeking to enlarge those selectivist services and financial supports which can continue to be cast, by opponents of 'social rights', as 'gifts' acquired through the taxation of the 'deserving', and which may invite the participation of professionals in shaping the meanings of home and daily lives.

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