Introduction
Introduction

Architecture is a cultural medium. By studying how the architecture of institution and home constructs and supports different cultural practices in each type of setting, this book explores what it means to understand architecture as a cultural medium. It shows how architecture -- both the ideas that generate buildings and the buildings themselves -- may play a pivotal role in cultural change.

The role of architecture is studied relative to the normalization or de-institutionalization movement in which thousands of residents of large, state-sponsored institutions have been and are being relocated into smaller residences in towns and cities in the United States and elsewhere. A body of empirical research documents the effects of architectural form on attitudes and behaviors. By demonstrating how architecture performs as a cultural medium, this book expands the view of architecture beyond primarily being an art, arguably the approach normative in architectural education and professional practice. Thus the study opens to a discussion of the fundamental changes for the architectural profession that are implied by the premise that architecture is a cultural medium.

The investigations pertaining to this book were completed during the 12-year period from 1981 through 1993, and were followed by substantiating research finished in 1996. Throughout the 1970's social science research oriented to social change was one of the central approaches taken in the study of architecture in the United States. However, during the period of this study, the focus of mainstream architectural research had evolved away from documenting specific behavioral effects toward the study of the character of the architectural object. Canonical works focused on social and cultural critique. They did not use social science methods to study popular perception or use of buildings, but studied architectural artifacts as narrative or discourse using techniques based in the humanities. In approaches parallel to textual analysis in literary theory, such descriptions and interpretations of existing environments were allied more closely with those of art history, geography, cultural anthropology and archaeology than with psychology and sociology. These works did not offer explicit options for design, but addressed design implicitly. Utilizing the lens of cultural criticism, this project augments the humanities' focus on architectural narrative with the investigation of use and perception of architecture and with explicit proposals for design practice that supports intentional, conscious cultural change.

This work is fundamentally architectural scholarship. It is profoundly influenced by environmental design research, the social science approach initiated in the 1960's and early 1970's and developed since then. It is architectural because the built environment is the central focus. Architecture is described, analyzed and interpreted; peoples' perceptions and actions are described, analyzed and interpreted relative to architectural design. In distinction from much of the early environmental design research, which relied on psychological methodology, the social science approach taken here, employs psychological methodology in part, but is rooted finally in anthropology. The overriding theoretical structure is that of the cultural context of architecture. The particular model of culture is parallel to that espoused by such authors as Bourdieu, Lefebvre and de Certeau for whom culture is created and sustained through performance, and architectural space is produced by means of social practices as well as by conceptual design and physical space. The approach to architecture is influenced by numerous authors, but most fundamentally by Rapoport, Cooper, Zeisel and Lang who see the built environment as a context for human activity with designers responsible for creating settings that support the building user.

Cultural criticism of historical and contemporary places has illuminated many of the values and ideas behind our environments through description, analysis and interpretation. Here we extend the methods of cultural critique to address social change and anticipation of the future. Combining the methods of text analysis from the humanities with methods of study of human perception and use from the social sciences provides the increased power of an argument based in empirical evidence. Whereas cultural critique by itself only theorizes what might be the effect of an environment, this work documents environmental effects and hypothesizes how design can support social change. Here, the methods of the humanities and the social sciences complement and mutually enhance each other, tying the study of the architectural artifact to the study of how people understand and use architecture.
This study cannot be said to be “objective” since it was clearly biased by the emancipatory goal of the normalization movement: to engage as much as possible in mainstream life those groups formerly institutionalized. In this case, we are especially concerned with the developmentally disabled. This research explores the role that architecture plays as a cultural vehicle to empower people who were previously seen as “other” and were thus denied opportunities for “normal” housing. In order to develop validity and reliability in our findings, we have employed research methods defined as “objective”. At the same time, we acknowledge that the findings raise as many questions as they answer. We draw conclusions for design with the goal of elucidating the complexity of the questions rather than providing pat answers.

Neither are the findings universally applicable, since the original work is clearly based not only in the American context of the United States, but in a region with a severe climate and with a majority population of people of European extraction (although that is changing). How many of the findings are particular to these location remains to be discovered. However, in the substantiating studies, we found the work largely transferable to Tennessee, a very different context within the United States. Universality of a different kind is implicit in this approach; the purpose is to reduce or eliminate marginality of a dependent group by maximizing what it has in common with the majority group. The purpose is not at to erase difference, but to offer equal opportunities for independence, positive identity and respect.

This project is linked to a great number of important issues, some of which I have already briefly addressed, others that I will develop further in this introduction and still others that are discussed later in the book. Because of the complexity of the topic, and the limitations of a single scholar, many issues that are relevant and important will undoubtedly be omitted, and for this I apologize to the reader.

A number of concepts frame the realization of this work: architecture, culture, normality and deinstitutionalization, ordinary architecture, building type, architecture as culture and architecture as art. Each of these concepts will be discussed briefly below. The introduction then concludes with a short description of the organization of the chapters of this book.

Architecture

To say that architecture is a cultural medium is not an attempt, in the words of Paul-Alan Johnson, to create a Grand Theory that will “align architects with inexorable universal forces and make them fit to govern their newly founded world by design, as Platonic philosopher-kings”(1994: xviii). It is instead an attempt to make sense of what I have observed the best architecture to be and to do, and to bring to the surface assumptions that seem to be held by the ordinary architectural practitioner, the ordinary client, the ordinary building user, and the ordinary architectural researcher. Although I will confess to a desire to see architecture as a unified whole, the approach taken here is straightforward rather than elaborate, dynamic rather than static, open-ended rather than hermetic. Instead of creating simplicity by reducing the myriad complex positions held by architects to a single view, it advocates coherence by bringing focus to the assumptions architects make.

What is architecture, when seen in the light of culture? Architecture consists of the mental and/or physical structures by which we inhabit the world. It is simultaneously art, science, and technology. Architecture is both a process and a product that consists of the mental structure of the ideal, the proposed and the received artifact, representations of the artifact, as well as the artifact itself, that is the built environment.

If the cultural perspective is so encompassing, how does it provide any advantage over the present diverse positions of the field?8 In conferring validity on difference, this perspective provides a way to meet the integrative necessity of the field, for an environment is to be constructed in the end. Simultaneously, the cultural perspective acknowledges the valid identities of the plurality of sub-fields
and approaches to architecture. Further, the cultural view permits critical analysis of the artifact in the context of change. The contingency of culture requires a constant reaffirmation through practice that complements the future orientation of the field. Finally, the cultural perspective links architects to daily life, to the enactment and production of culture, to the people who create culture in the quotidian world and to the responsibility for creating environments that support the constructive aspects of culture rather than those that are destructive to individuals and groups.

Culture

Culture is a shared and evolving vision of the world, a mental construct (Hoebel, 1956) that is reproduced and manifested directly in behavior and indirectly in artifacts. Culture is a collective process, maintained through practices, but supported by artifacts and by memory. Collective memory is fundamental to culture, and artifacts serve to cue collective memory. Since every culture contains contradictions that are also shared, these may create important divergences among the members of the group.

Individuals generally function unconsciously in their daily life within what Bourdieu calls the “habitus” (1977:1984). When we see the habitus as cultural patterns that persist only insofar as they are performed, that places great importance on each one of us individually and all of us collectively as enactors of culture. Furthermore, insofar as we are aware of our cultural patterns, the concept of performance implies that we can consciously change our culture by changing our actions. While the issue of conscious change of culture is theoretically problematic, practically it is a given. It is taking place every day.

In other words, these shared cultural conceptions are not fixed, but evolve over time as circumstances change and contradictions or new opportunities become apparent. In the context, or interpretive community (Fish, 1980) within which this study takes place, that of United States society, cultural ideas are perpetuated or changed in many ways. At the level of local and national politics certain laws are passed and policies are implemented. The media---such as television, radio, newspapers, advertising, books, or music, --- support or alter cultural ideas through sound, visual images and texts. These changes occur between individuals as certain people insist on some things and other people acquiesce. They take place as individuals collectively invent, accept or reject ways of doing things. The process of cultural sustenance or change is so diffuse and made up of so many individual actions that cultural ideas have a kind of life of their own beyond the direct influence of any one person or group.

But in every case cultural ideas happen in the context of memory. Each cultural action takes place in the context of others, whether replicating or altering known patterns, for culture is a pattern or set of patterns. Happenings that occur without reference to that pattern cannot be called cultural in the same sense. If we are studying culture, we are studying memory. The physical setting has powerful associations with remembered activities, often engendering them, as the doorknob engenders the act of turning to open the latch. Architectural design has an important potential role to play in cultural perpetuation or change.

If built architecture generally expresses existing cultural patterns from the past, including their contradictions, proposed buildings or changes to buildings either serve to reinforce old conceptions or to support new ones. This is evident in the tendency to build new buildings to express new ideas, or to tear down old structures that no longer seem to reflect our current ways of doing things. But of course, new buildings are also likely to express current cultural contradictions, like new shopping malls designed to look like colonial buildings or office buildings with a fancy new facades that are laid out in the same old way.

As we shall see, the hypothesized dialectic of institution and home like every other cultural concept, has certain inherent contradictions and inconsistencies. Furthermore, it is likely that these two conceptions about buildings, which are both operative in our society, may have once been understood to apply to two discrete, non-overlapping realms of building.
The approach is a kind of heterotypology in its detailed comparative analysis and reading of the home as a kind of utopia and the institution as a heterotopia of deviance (Foucault 1993[1967]), but anti-Foucaultian in its concern to apply the knowledge to improving housing for the dependent person (McLeod 1996). Here, applying the conception of culture as evolving, I explore these two notions in order to discover how they were understood in 1984, and how that might provide insight into design today.

Architecture is a cultural medium that exerts a force on the cultural fabric, a force for cultural continuity or change. Bourdieu asserts that the most powerful cultural effects are those that are silent, because we are not aware of the force that they exert upon us. As we will discuss later, the apparent silence of architecture as a cultural force should only serve to make us more interested in its operation. Insofar as we ignore and do not challenge the cultural messages sent by architecture, we maintain the cultural status quo.

Normality and Deinstitutionalization

In every culture, maintaining social structures requires conformity to shared expectations or norms. Any individual who is not able to comply with the social rules is marginalized within day-to-day cultural practices. In and of themselves, norms are not necessarily a problem, but what may be a problem is how we define norms, how we determine when they are met, and how we address those who do not fit within our norms. The emphasis in Western society on the use of statistical description to assess the status of individuals in the society (official poverty levels, IQ tests, etc.) has reinforced the use of abstract, quantitative norms as a relevant description. Previously, groups who did not fit mental, developmental or income norms were ostracized to places away from the daily life of so-called normal citizens, either in institutions or housing ghettos. Now such rigid descriptions and their rigid application have begun to seem unreasonable and are no longer accepted as appropriate. However, for many, this segregation remains an ideal. Even today in the United States we do not find adequate means for housing and otherwise accommodating certain people. This speaks to a continuing, profound fear of the differences between people and a corresponding self-imposed blindness to the needs and the dignity of people who do not fall within these defined social norms.

Using norms as a source for comparison is a double-edged sword. Although norms can be used to create conformity when it is unnecessary, so can norms be used to raise the standards of life for people who are in a group presently stigmatized. When norms are used to restrict alternatives or to stigmatize people perceived as non-normal, they become an impediment to productive change, but when used as a basis for providing human rights to people, they become a useful locus of comparison.

Rather than assess the way individuals fit or do not fit social norms, or the way that social norms are developed and applied, in this study we are primarily concerned to understand and critique architectural norms, the norms we use to construct environments for particular purposes. In an egalitarian society, the respect for human dignity requires that all people should have access to basic needs, among them housing. By using the idea of norms to assess housing in American society, we find that it is common practice for "normal" people to have apartments and houses as long-term dwellings, and to inhabit dormitories, barracks, hotels and other institutional settings only for short-term use, while those perceived as non-normal have traditionally inhabited institutions on a long-term basis.

In order to transcend our present housing patterns we need to understand what we are doing presently. In the process of reevaluating our housing in terms of "non-normal" groups, we have found that institutional forms of housing have not always proven effective. Taking Goffman’s analysis of institutions as a starting point (1961) this research supports the normalization or deinstitutionalization movement, which advocates housing for everyone that is as close to the mainstream as possible (Nirje, 1969). If we are to choose to provide "normal" rather than "institutional" housing for all citizens, however, we need to be
able to know what these two terms mean architecturally. This study explores the relationship between these terms and their broader relations to architectural design.

In parts of the United States, it has taken only about 25 years for normalization to effect the legal, and increasingly the cultural, acceptance of handicapping conditions as non-stigmatizing. Architecture has played a significant role in this accelerated, conscious, cultural change. Since the inception of this research in 1981, I have seen normalization of housing for dependent populations become accepted practice in much of the United States. Thousands of residents of large, state-sponsored institutions have been, and continue to be, relocated into smaller residences in towns and cities in the United States and elsewhere. Additionally, other institutional settings are being held to new standards of design, such as institutions for the elderly, from independent living facilities to nursing homes for dementia patients. For the architect and others, the question of how architecture can or should contribute to such change is fundamental, but the ubiquitous role housing design plays in normalization is not yet well understood. This work elucidates in great detail how architecture may support or frustrate the goals of normalization.

The deinstitutionalization or normalization movement has identified a link between the social organization of the large institutional residential setting, its physical form, and the lack of "normal" behavior of its residents. The normalization principle of providing social and physical environments as close as possible to everyday settings implies an oppositional relation between institutional and ordinary or "normal" ways of living. However the architectural character of the settings associated with these two living styles, while assumed to be an important support mechanism, is only beginning to be carefully described. That was the original purpose of this research.

In addition to having norms, every culture has institutions. The term "institution" has several meanings. Mary Douglas describes institution as a "legitimized social grouping" and goes on to discuss the possible types of institutions (family, game, ceremony) and their legitimating authorities (personal or diffused: based on common assent or a founding principle) (1986: 46). While acknowledging the validity of a broader definition, in the context of this book we will more narrowly define institutions as bureaucratic organizations and the buildings that stand for them. Thus, while in the widest sense the family is an institution and the dwelling is the building which stands for the family, the narrower definition will allow us to distinguish between the architecture of family and that of bureaucracy.

Institutionalization is pervasive in our society, and what are here called institutional values are used in the design of just about every place other than the single family dwelling, including the workplace, schools, commercial buildings, and daycare centers. Part and parcel of the largest sector of our construction industry, institutional design is reinforced by typical development and financing procedure as well as by law, in the form of things such as zoning and building codes. Characterized by a primacy of economics over human aspiration and need, the institutional approach to design that is taken for granted results from culturally sanctioned values that we do not have to perpetuate.

Ordinary Architecture, Building Types

To study the role architecture plays in daily life, one must focus upon the ordinary building. The ordinary building is an atypical architectural topic; architects tend to focus their interest on the special building. But if architects are to play a central role in affecting cultural change, as I argue they can and should, it is necessary to understand the powerful role that ordinary buildings play in affecting everyday activities, a role perhaps more important than that played by special buildings. Appreciating the ordinary building also implies a different kind of architectural aesthetic, one derived from inhabitation and daily life rather than from the symbolism of economics and power.

Cultural conceptions take form in the memory as associations of memories. Places play a central role in memory since experiences occur in time and place. Places not only affect what we do instrumentally,
but, of equal significance, they symbolically affect our actions by the associations we have with previous experiences. Such associations are not simply individual recollections related to singular experiences, but are communal, in the sense that a group of people who over time share common experiences in common places develop shared categories of places and experiences. Place types are such a cultural category (Francescato, 1994).

In this study we focused on housing as a category of place. We were initially concerned with housing for developmentally disabled adults in general, and with group homes in particular. We discovered that group homes could only be understood in reference to many housing types, because at that time the group home was evolving as a housing type and was still in many ways undefined. Our challenge became to understand the nature of housing relative to issues of empowerment for developmentally disabled people. We were especially concerned to follow the normalization principles that acknowledged the special needs that such a group might have, but also advocated that housing be identical to mainstream design or as similar as possible.

The range of housing that existed for developmentally disabled people in 1981-84 led to the dichotomous pair, institution and home, as an underlying conception for categorization. In the course of the research we explored the relation between these two categories and the types of housing that might be found generally in any urban area. At first, we applied familiar architectural notions of building type, such as “single family dwelling” without any particular critical perspective. However, when the terms had to be operationalized in research, it became clear that the definitions between housing types as used informally in design were ambiguous and overlapping. All apartments were not equal; “walk-up” apartments had different connotations than “high rise” apartments. There were inconsistencies in criteria between, for example, public housing (a term defined by the source of funding) and row housing and apartments (terms defined by the physical relationship between dwellings). Similarly, many of the ways that designers categorized housing type (such as by plan arrangement, distinguishing the atrium house from the shotgun house) initially had little obvious relation to our work.

Investigation of housing from the viewpoint of empowerment gradually yielded several interesting results. First, we discovered that building types were perceived somewhat differently than we had assumed they would be. Secondly, we discovered that architecture communicates the categories of institution and home in two ways: symbolically, through building image and character of space and instrumentally, through the organization and arrangement of spaces. Housing design, especially in the form of building type, was found to play an essential role in the communication and support of habitability and the development of personal and community identity.

The issues of institution and home became a vehicle for exploring differences between housing types. The different housing types are described in terms of the cultural ideas that they embody. We identify particular differences between the forms of the housing (whether the housing unit is directly or indirectly accessible to the street, whether a building is small or large, whether an inhabitant has their own apartment or merely their own bed). These forms are linked to the cultural memories of experiences that happen within these types of places, and thus to the expectations for what will happen there. We explain how the forms contribute to critical distinctions between the types of housing that we use in design. In this way, we elucidate architecture’s role in the creation of the patterns of daily life.

**Architecture as Culture, Architecture as Avant Garde Art**

The difference between understanding architecture as a cultural medium or an Avant Garde artistic medium may not be immediately apparent, but it raises fundamental questions about which buildings are to be called architecture, what the role of the architect is, and where the ultimate authority for the form of buildings lies. To provide an oversimplified summary, the proposition that architecture is an Avant
Garde art limits the appellation “architecture” to those buildings built by architects that embody an aesthetic synthesis of issues of context, technology and human needs. This synthesis is defined as an achievement of artistic expression by the designer. Here, ultimate authority for the form of the building, defined as its artistic expression, is the designer-artist, and historical reference is used for legitimization. But the Cultural community—capital letter used advisedly to denote a limited sense of the word “culture”—determines which buildings are defined as architecture. This Cultural community, an architectural elite, consists of: (1) the different groups who publicize buildings and identify the avant-garde designers (critics, journalists, museum curators, film makers, etc.), (2) clients who pay for buildings and give opportunities for designers to build, (3) academics and publishers who create the architectural canon (art historians, architectural academics, publishers of architectural books), and (4) the profession and public outcry over publicized proposals, the role is responsive, indirect and usually occurs after a design is complete. When architecture is defined as an artistic medium, at least as presently operative, there is no delineated place in the design process for the role of the lay audience.

An alternative view, again oversimplified, is less exclusively oriented to the profession and paying clients. As a cultural medium, architecture incorporates all human constructions, not just those made by architects. Defined as a cultural process, the creation of buildings is a broad societal responsibility in which architects play the role of specialist. To participate effectively, architects must be competent in the ordinary cultural language of their time and place. They must understand the existing cultural ideas, critique the existing patterns of building, improve the existing buildings, propose new patterns that better represent societal ideals, exemplify these ideas in new buildings, and educate society about the new ideas. It’s a more complex role than that of Avant Garde artists; it includes artistry, but places the architects’ role as central to rather than at the margins of society. In this capacity, the artistry of architecture is not limited to aesthetics of architectural form, but is essentially bound to the aesthetics of daily life.

As a cultural medium, architecture is not limited to the architectural form of a building design, but in addition to addressing its functioning as an art object, architecture includes responsibility for the ideas embedded in the form, for the methods of construction, for the actual functioning of the building, and for its long term maintenance and alteration. Such a view acknowledges that ideas about societal values and how to represent them in architecture change over time, and that it is possible to take a critical perspective about them. At the same time, it locates the ultimate authority for building content where it actually should be, in society. Society, in this view, has a role in the design process in addition to the process of response to proposals.

There are many ways to incorporate the aesthetics of daily life and the cultural views of a society in the design process; all of them imply interaction with the cultural audience and a concern for the reception of architecture. The need to work with the cultural ideas of individuals and groups leads to the proposal for a reception theory that addresses the role of the lay person in making architecture. Such a theory is discussed in the conclusion of this text. The approach of this research is but one of a variety of methods by which the ordinary person can contribute to or participate in the design process.

In professional practice architects normally have clients and sometimes user groups to whom they respond, and the personal artistic expression of the architect is muted by practical circumstances and by societal attitudes. From the artistic perspective, these practical circumstances are often interpreted as undesirable interference, whereas from a cultural perspective they are seen as important sources of architectural content and expression. This difference changes the position of the architect from one of personal controller to that of mediator or interpreter, actually a position closer to that found in many architectural practices.

The conception of architecture as an Avant Garde art may simply be a contradiction to what in fact occurs in the field. Many architects may actually practice architecture in a cultural mode, but because of
the dominant vision that architecture is an art, they may not understand their practices for what they are. Without an alternative description that matches their actual practices, they may simply assume that their way of doing things is a variant form of practicing architecture as an art. Delineating what it might mean to interpret architecture as a cultural medium may empower these architects to enter into a more completely cultural practice and into a discussion of how to reconceive the field to respond more effectively to cultural issues.

In the academy the situation may be similar. Certainly many, perhaps most, architectural educators have a great veneration for vernacular architecture, and are fascinated by cultural patterns and norms, yet they haven’t known how to incorporate these ideas into mainstream architectural design. Krishna Menon emphasizes the dangers of the imposition of the Western focus on the avant-garde on cultures such as those in India where traditional practices have much to offer (2001). Even writers such as Alexander, Rapoport and Brand who have been understood as significant contributors remain at the margins because mainstream academic architectural theory, which valorizes the concept of architecture as avant-garde art, has had no good way to incorporate their ideas.

In a single book, the implications of practicing architecture as a cultural medium can only be presented in a very limited way. This case study will illustrate just one approach. Furthermore developing such an idea is the work of a community, not a single person. So here I will build on the work of others and propose a vision of what practicing architecture as a cultural medium might mean, especially for architectural research.

**Structure of the Book and Presentation of Ideas**

In addition to the Introduction and the Appendices, the book is structured into two parts that address theory and research.

**Part I:** Theoretical Structure consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 lays out the fundamental assumptions about architecture as a cultural medium. Chapter 2 discusses how concepts of cultural change relate to architectural theory and Chapter 3 addresses the analysis and interpretation of housing design from the perspective of cultural change.

**Part II:** Research and Conclusions presents the research findings. Chapter 4 explains the architectural research methodology in terms of the general findings. Chapter 5 presents the normative concepts institution and home. Chapter 6 analyzes the living room as an example of semantic representation and expression. Chapter 7 explores ideas about territory derived from a syntactical analysis of institution and home, and Chapter 8 explicates institutionality based on syntactical analysis of residential building types. Finally, Chapter 9 draws conclusions about the research method and findings.

**Part III:** Appendices provides detailed information about research methods, and research instruments and findings that may be of interest to the scholarly reader.
Notes


2. During the period of this study little of the U. S. work focused on documenting actual behavior (some exceptions being Marcus & Sarkissian 1986, Altman & Werner 1985, Carpman 1986, Farbstein 1986, Cohen and Day 1983), nevertheless some excellent work has focused on cultural criticism and social change during this time, including such work as: Franck & Ahrentzen 1981, Hayden 1984, McCamant and Durrett 1989, Sprague 1991, Regnier 1994.


5. In focusing on the architecture of building type, here housing, this work meets Guido Francescato's definition of architectural scholarship that uses social science research (1994).

6. Founded by such people as Jane Jacobs, Edward Hall, Robert Sommer, Amos Rapoport, Christopher Alexander, and Oscar Newman, and further developed in the 1970's, 80's and 90's by numerous others.

7. Some important exceptions being Hall, Rapoport and Cooper Marcus.

8. I have written previously about the relations between culture and the discipline of architecture, see especially Robinson 2001.

9. This work is concerned with the culture of everyday life and ordinary places more than with the memory of "high" architecture. In this sense, it resembles the work of Christopher Alexander and parallels approaches taken by urbanists and other thinkers, including J.B. Jackson, Dolores Hayden and Christine Boyer.