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NEWS

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Planners See Sound, Light, Color In Design Role to Foster 'Well-Being'

Architects and urban planners have begun to join with experts in sound, light and color to help create people-friendly "eco-cities" of the future that will foster improved mental health and well-being.

This was the focus of a forum at Steelcase in New York City March 25 that featured talks and videos by noted city planners and environmental consultants. The forum kicked off "Sensations," a two-month exhibit in the Steelcase lobby on Columbus Circle that demonstrates the use of sound, color and light to create an environment that fosters a positive sensory experience, according to Charlie Morrow, a sound artist and composer who designed the "soundscape" for the lobby.

"Shaping the aural environment is often controversial," said Morrow, whose company Charles Morrow Productions of New York and Helsinki, has created sound designs for major indoor and outdoor projects in Helsinki, Amsterdam, Barcelona and New York. CM Productions and Steelcase co-sponsored the "Sensations" exhibit and forum.

"The sounds created in a city--and even the silences--can be inspirational," he said, "but they can alter people's conception of how they define the urban experience. That can make creation of an auditory environment a controversial undertaking."

The demand for making urban environments more sensitive to the mental well-being of their inhabitants was underscored by Robert Morrow, M.D., Associate Clinical Professor with the Department of Family and Social Medicine at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York.

Dr. Morrow said that urban noise can generate panic attacks, which are primitive mechanisms that human beings have developed when confronted by threatening external forces. “We need to structure the environment to lower the level of ‘terror’ to promote mental well-being,” he said. “Our mental health is better served by an environment in which we hear pigeons, not ambulance sirens.”

Mark Greiner, Senior Vice President for Steelcase WorkSpace Futures, Grand Rapids, MI, said his work consists of creating "experiential designs" in which "experiencing the space goes beyond the furniture. The space needs to reflect the needs and moods of the individuals who inhabit it, which challenges a designer to incorporate all the elements that contribute to the total experience."

Color is an important contribution to the experience of the space, said architect and designer Shashi Caan of The Collective, New York City. "Our research has challenged myths about color's effect on behavior," she said. "We found, for example, that although the color red has traditionally been associated with creating a desire to eat and drink, which is why many restaurants and bars have red and burgundy colors in them, people actually ate and drank twice as much in a surrounding in which the dominant color was yellow."

"Sound, color and light can work to connect people," noted Jeremiah Tesolin, Senior Art Director of Nokia, Helsinki. Designers of both interior and exterior spaces, he said, need to "start with people" and create "ideal social spaces" by creating environments, using sound, color and light, that reflect the changing needs and moods of people interacting at different times and in different circumstances.

Other forum participants were George Ladyman, Managing Director of Jones Lang LaSalle, New York City, and Neal Woodger, acoustician and director of Arup, London, who described a "revolutionary eco-city outside Beijing now under construction, which is defining a "new way to approach urban living" by banning the internal combustion vehicle. "One aim," he said, "is to create a quieter ambiance in the city so that you can hear the birds sing—which helps contribute to a greater sense of well-being of residents and workers within the city."

The event was moderated by Marty Goldensohn, veteran public radio and television host, who noted that city planners have begun to realize "the sensory impact of design."