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Search and Research

The search for information, or data, or examples, or a
guiding notion for design, does not equate to research,
contrary to what many of the EDRA/*Places* Awards
submissions tacitly assumed. To be sure, a great deal of
useful knowledge can be gained from dialogues with
clients or occupants, by observing how environments
are currently used or by interaction with people in
newly completed environments.

But research implies much more. In Webster's terms,
it means the "careful, systematic, patient study and
investigation in some field of knowledge, undertaken
to establish facts or principles." What distinguishes
research from other fields of endeavor is the desire for
theories that go beyond the specific instance — facts or
principles, or, others might say, theories and models,
from which particular solutions can evolve. The
notion of a field of knowledge is as central to research
as site and client are to design. Good research con-
tributes to an evolving body of knowledge, reframing
the way we see things, and enriching the field for
future design and inquiry.

Several of the EDRA/*Places* submissions stand out as
examples of how research can shape design. The
Bryant Park Restoration Project, a fine design in its
own right, was built on the foundation of years of
studies of public spaces in New York City. Begun by
William H. Whyte and colleagues, continued by
scores of faculty and students in the environmental
psychology program at the City University of New
York Graduate Center, these have produced a wealth

of important theories about why public spaces work or
fail. The results have been documented over the years
through films and publications, tested through a range
of small experiments in which spaces were modified
and observed, and tried in temporary improvements to
Bryant Park before the current reconstruction. The
result is by now a substantial body of knowledge about
how to create hospitable and safe urban public spaces.
By learning to see and manage parks differently, it
became possible to design Bryant Park in a new way.
The importance of this work goes well beyond New
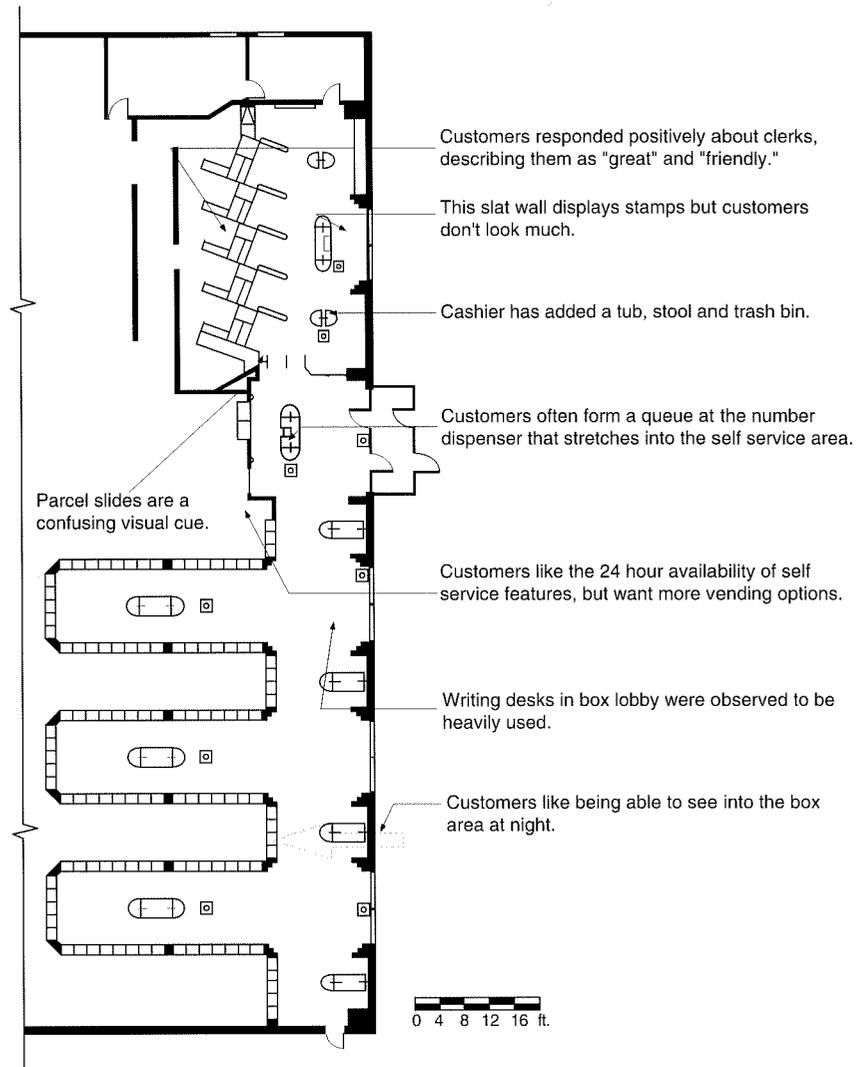York City; it is rooted in more general theories of
behavior in public places.

An even more ambitious and systematic process of
research, paralleling the building of public spaces, may
be found in the Copenhagen *Public Spaces, Public Life*
research document. The changes to public spaces in
central Copenhagen — a series of changes that have
extended over twenty-seven years and, through dozens
of projects — have been based on a constantly evolving
set of notions about sociable spaces. Each project has
been carefully studied after reconstruction to test
whether the design ideas were sound. The report on the
project is a fine textbook on public life in urban spaces.

At the building scale, an important body of knowledge
is evolving through the research and design of assisted
living environments for Alzheimer's patients in a suc-
cession of New England projects. And a set of experi-
ments with new U.S. Postal Service retail outlets (not
chosen for an award) demonstrates how useful knowl-

Academy Station

Customers responded positively about clerks, describing them as "great" and "friendly."

This slat wall displays stamps but customers don't look much.

Cashier has added a tub, stool and trash bin.

Customers often form a queue at the number dispenser that stretches into the self service area.

Parcel slides are a confusing visual cue.

Customers like the 24 hour availability of self service features, but want more vending options.

Writing desks in box lobby were observed to be heavily used.

Customers like being able to see into the box area at night.
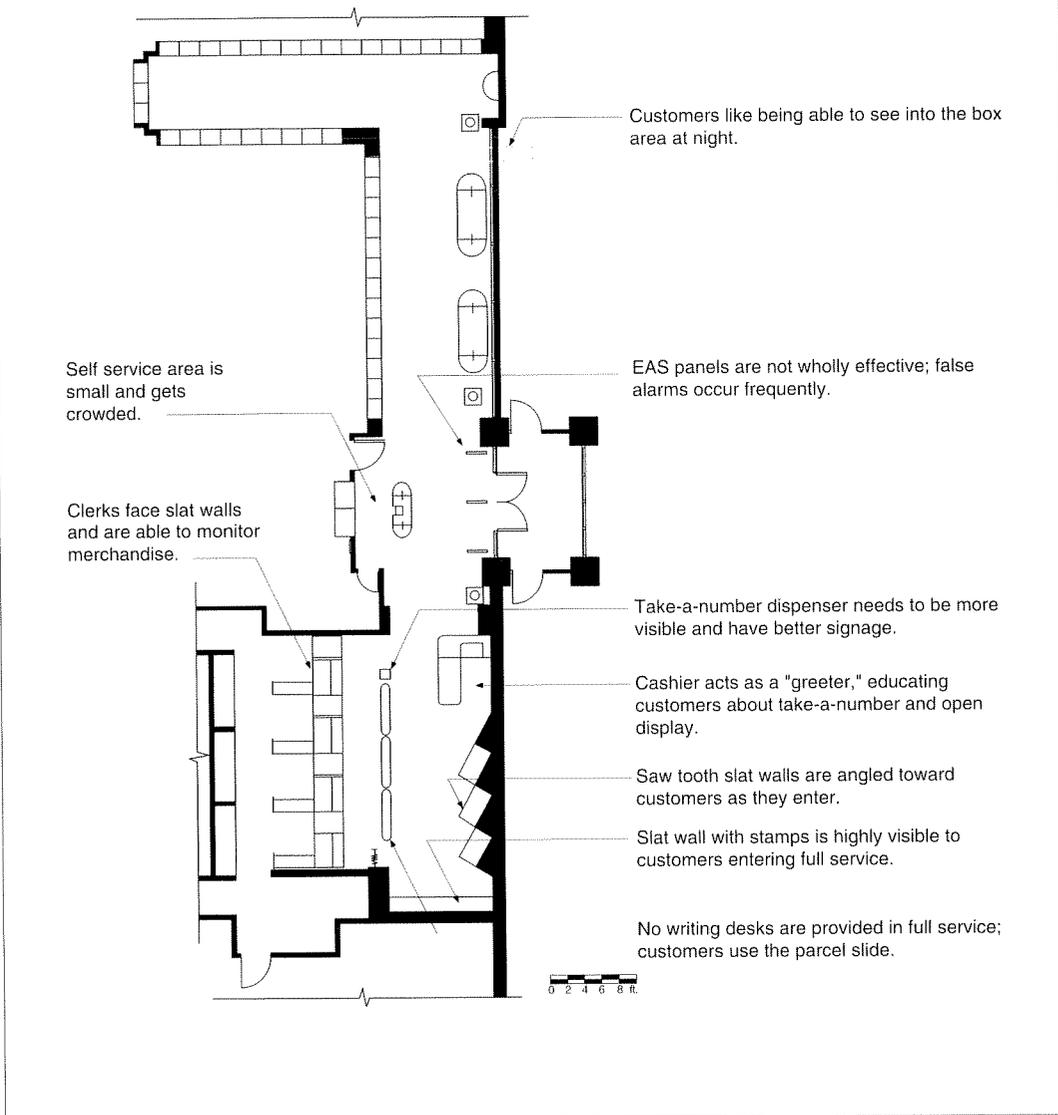
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edge can be gained through creative experiments with even common building types.

Each of these projects is distinguished by having a clear strategy linking research and design. In the Copenhagen public space project, the Alzheimer's housing projects and the design of postal facilities, the succession of projects allows the knowledge from one to inform the next. This is easier said than done in a world that values novelty and is often willing to discard all that is known in the interest of attracting attention.

On close inspection, the real secret of these three projects is a dedicated individual or institution, positioned to take action and determined to learn from each instance. Profit may serve as one incentive for doing

so, or it may be rooted in a strong ethic of progress and improvement. The most hopeful result of this award program is the discovery that a number of organizations have developed an internal culture that values learning through experiments.

Where the body of knowledge must cross institutional or geographic boundaries, other strategies are required. Academics can serve an important role by keeping abreast of field experiments, and periodically codifying what is known through articles and textbooks. Sometimes a large project serves the purpose of focusing knowledge on actions. The publication *Blueprint for a Sustainable Bay Area* was a remarkable compilation of research and policies on ecological sustainability at the scale of the urban region; it will serve as an important model for other cities.

Customers like being able to see into the box area at night.

EAS panels are not wholly effective; false alarms occur frequently.

Self service area is small and gets crowded.

Clerks face slat walls and are able to monitor merchandise.

Take-a-number dispenser needs to be more visible and have better signage.

Cashier acts as a "greeter," educating customers about take-a-number and open display.

Saw tooth slat walls are angled toward customers as they enter.

Slat wall with stamps is highly visible to customers entering full service.

No writing desks are provided in full service; customers use the parcel slide.

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Professional journals can make a point of consistently publishing reports of experiments in defined fields. The danger, however, is that while these encourage the flow of ideas among researchers, those in positions to design or commission projects may be blissfully unaware of them.

A few special purpose organizations have evolved that are dedicated to both research and action, such as Project for Public Spaces, which for many years kept alive the tradition of translating observations of public spaces into prescriptions for changes (PPS was one of the organizations that focused its attention on Bryant Park). Groups such as this need the cross-fertilization of competing ideas, lest they lapse into ideologies. Professional associations that bind together potential clients for research are important vehicles for both

compiling and disseminating the results of studies. Researchers need to shed their inhibitions and form alliances with developers, non-profit housing agencies, business improvement districts, and historic preservation groups, all of whom can benefit from their knowledge. This will require a new appreciation of how behavioral, economic and social factors intersect in decisions about environments.

Searching for the particularities of a project will always be an important prelude to design. But a body of useful knowledge will only evolve when research also becomes part of the agenda.