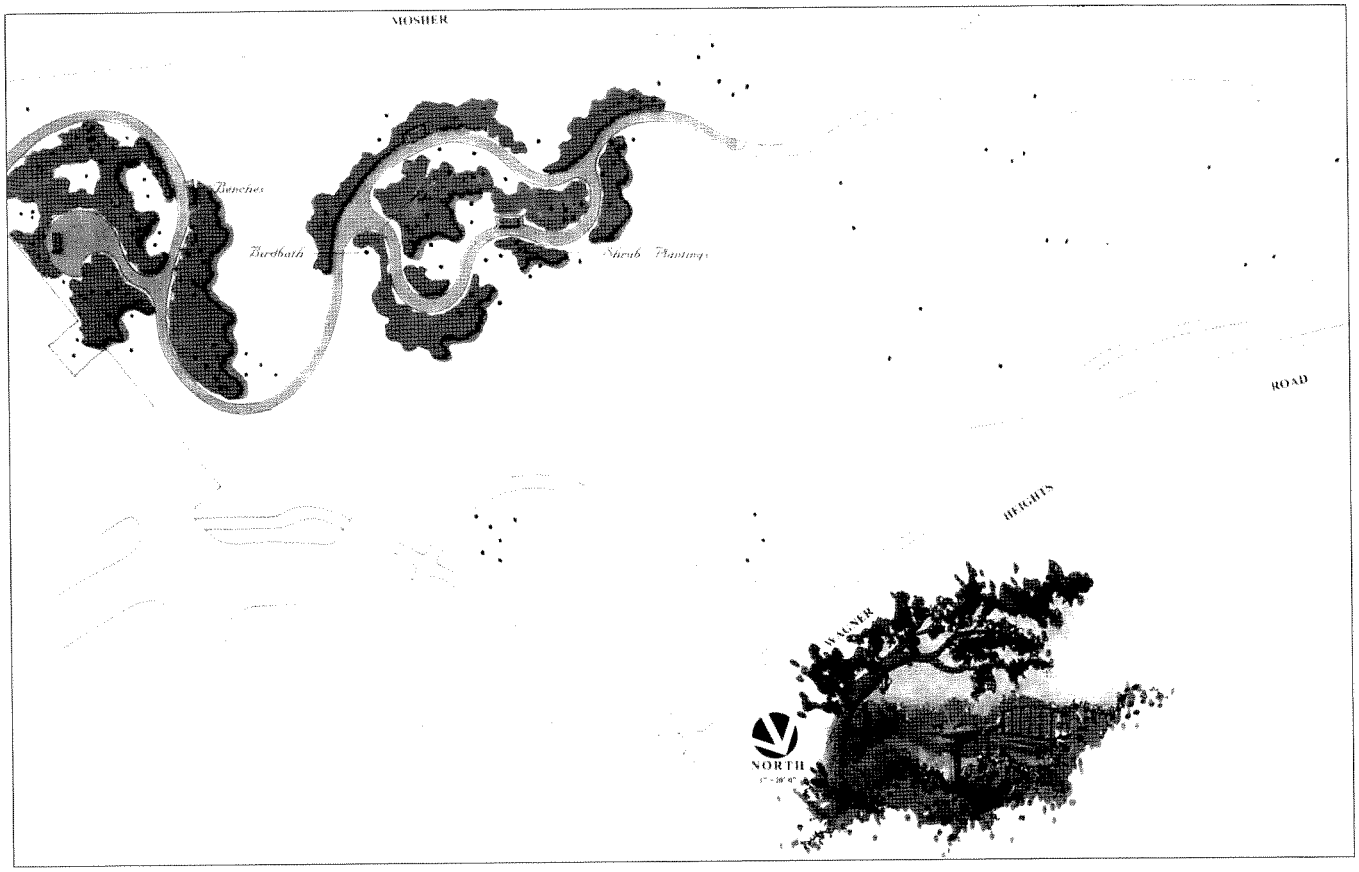
Clare Cooper Marcus

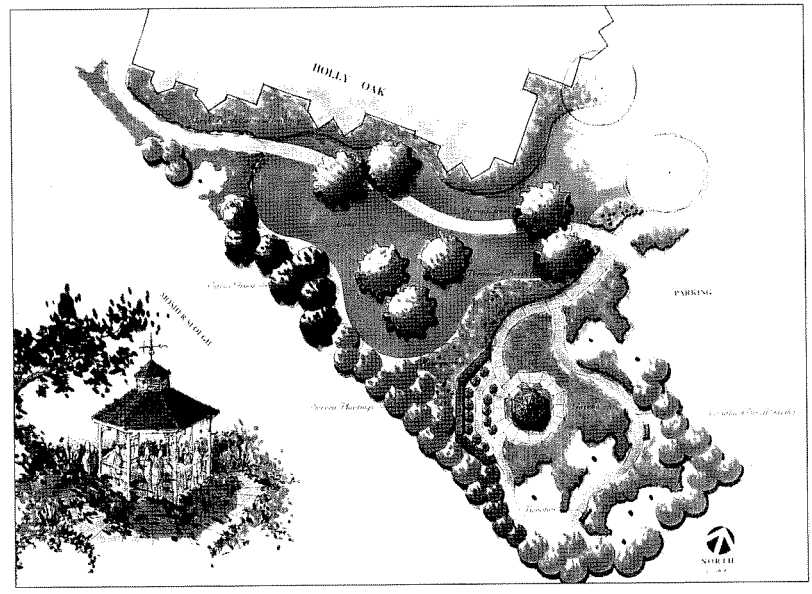
On Recognizing Research



The EDRA/*Places* Awards provided an interesting perspective into the direction of place-related research and how it is being used. The research submissions fell into a number of categories: post-occupancy evaluation of specific places and building types, more generalized data-gathering integrated within an urban design study or studio project, historical–archaeological research and theoretical discussions and research proposals. In terms of research that could directly inform and enhance the design of future places, those submissions that fell into the first two categories were the most rewarding.

Post-occupancy evaluation (POE) — or the systemic appraisal of a setting after it has been designed, constructed or occupied — is a form of research that has been strongly supported by EDRA since its inception in the late 1960s. In fact, it was the very lack of this research or any mandate for it that brought concerned social researchers and designers together to form this organization. Now after thirty years, there is a literature of POE, some of the most recent being submitted to the awards program.

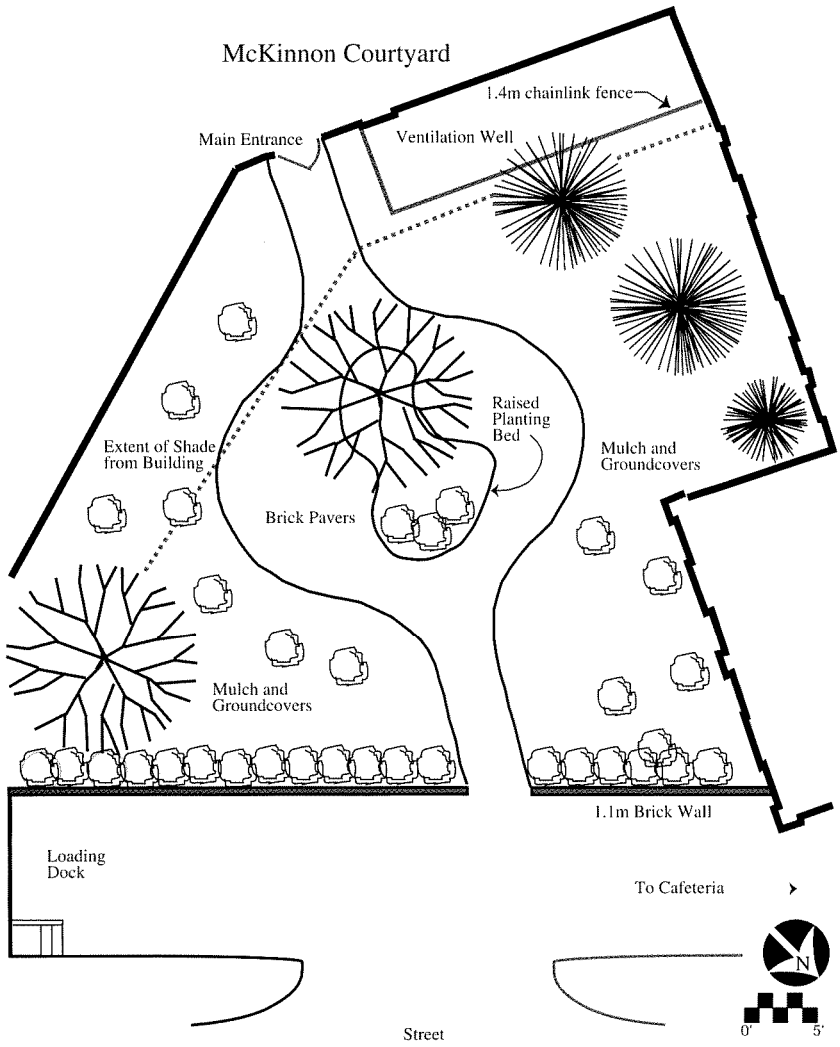
Most commendable in this category was the award-winning research on Alzheimer's facilities, which not only used multiple methods at multiple sites, but also resulted in findings that clearly indicate the physical environment as a modality of healing. Alzheimer's disease is not presently curable, but any research that helps us see how the actual design of facilities can help ameliorate the progression of this distressing disease is boundary-breaking and of enormous import.



Images from the Participatory Research for the O'Connor Woods Senior Community Landscape Master Plan.
Submitted by: **Fisher & Hall Urban Design, Windsor, Calif.**

It is interesting also to see excellent research directed at, for example, the use of public space over a thirty-year period (*Public Spaces , Public Life*, Jan Gehl and Lars Gemzøe); the use of urban public space in cold weather (*The Winter Life of Small Urban Spaces in*

One of Fifteen Patient and Staff Behaviour Observation Areas

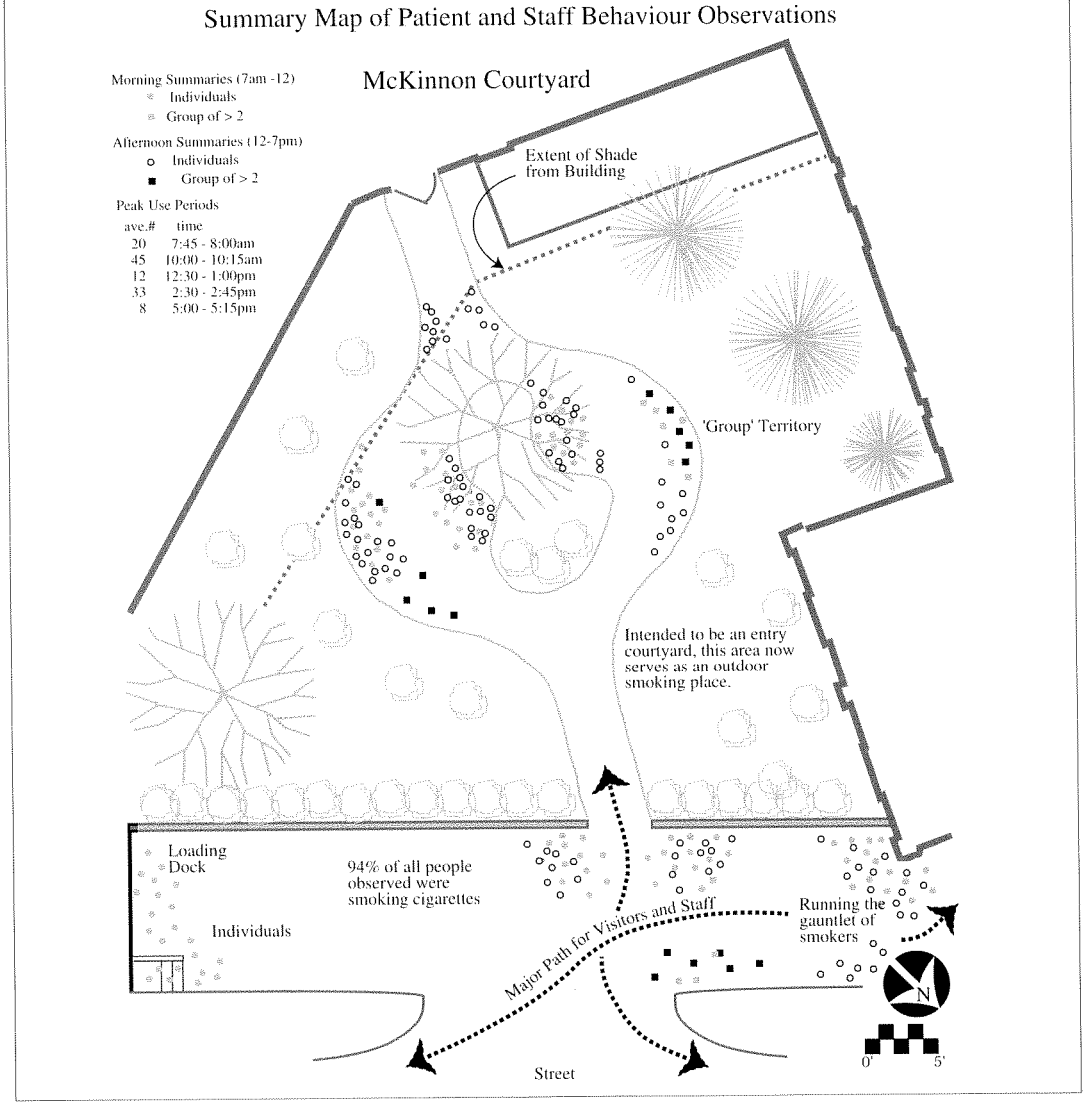


New York City, Shaogang Li); public reaction to the design of post office lobbies (*U.S. Postal Service Retail Lobby Evaluation*, Jay Farbstein) and user input in the development of a landscape master plan for a senior housing–assisted living complex (*Participatory Research for the O'Connor Woods Senior Community*, Fisher and Hall Urban Design).While most POE studies used the familiar data-gathering methods of interviews, surveys and behavior mapping, some used more innovative methods. One gave user–participants disposable cameras to photograph areas that should be preserved or needed more shade (*O'Connor Woods Study*, cited above). Another employed innovative interactive computer technology to gather input from staff and patients in generating plans for place-improvement in a hospital (*An Experience-Based Master Plan for a Psychiatric Hospital*, Nathan H. Perkins).

Submissions that could be roughly categorized as data-gathering to inform a planning document, urban design study or a studio project were not, to me, as interesting or innovative. For the most part, this consisted of pulling together existing information on demographic trends, water quality, transit use, traffic flows and so on, and presenting it within the framework of a local or regional plan. This work was laudable but not particularly innovative.

More commendable were a very few submissions where the most difficult task was attempted of relating cultural norms to a proposed design program (for example, the *Rio Rancho Community Studio*, Min Kantrowitz, and *Research on an Urban Design in Karimabad, Pakistan*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

Perhaps it would be useful for those who plan to submit next year if I were to comment on some of the weaknesses in this year's submissions. Some presented research proposals not yet carried out. Some presented completed research but included minimal discussion of application. Since this is an awards program focused on place-enhancing research, the jury considered this a lack. Some proposals presented research that was nothing more than a place or building description, or the assemblage of easily accessible facts.



"An Experience-Based Master Plan for a Psychiatric Hospital." McKinnon Courtyard, before and after with a summary map of patient and staff behavior observations. *Submitted by:* **Nathan H. Perkins, Ontario, Canada**

Unfortunately, the term "research" has wide usage in contemporary American English, covering anything from randomized, double blind medical studies to a third grader looking up facts about armadillos in the encyclopedia. Certainly, in the area of environmental design we need more discussion of what constitutes research. Is a commendable site or contextual analysis prior to design, research? Does a trip to the library to look up a few articles on parks prior to designing one, constitute research? Unfortunately, the semester-bounded studio-teaching of design rarely includes time for anything beyond relatively superficial fact-finding. While this is understandable in terms of primary focus of design-training, it does tend to leave some designers with a rather hazy idea of what research is, and hence what might be appropriate to submit for an award in place-based research.

In terms of weaknesses, at the other end of the scale, so to speak, were rather large tomes, poorly presented and organized, that may contribute to place-based research but which were not easily accessible to the jury. Finally, and this is not a weakness or criticism, a number of full-length published books were submitted. For example, *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology* and *Out of Place: Restoring Identity in Regional Landscape* were nominated. Unfortunately, the jury could not do justice to these in a packed, one-day evaluation process. Both of these books probably deserved an award. In the future, it would help if the submission rules required that published books be submitted along with a range of reviews from scholarly journals which could facilitate the jury's understanding of the value and impact of the work.

Overall, the review of submissions was a stimulating and rewarding experience. Place-based research is alive and well! Hopefully, with wider publicity and with more specific parameters for submission, next year's award program will cull an even richer harvest of design and research work.