The Great Escape

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Introduction

In the course of carrying out occupant surveys on buildings we hear users saying the same things time and again: 'more daylight and better views out, please', 'not so uncomfortable, especially in the summer', 'less interruptions', and countless more.

Occasionally a remark sticks out. One such was:

> "Love it: never feel 'trapped' or desperate to escape (as I have done in other work environments)." [2]

As with most user comments there is nothing particularly special about this when taken by itself. It is also obvious what is being said. But notice that they don't put it positively, saying something like: "The building makes me feel freer". "Never feel trapped" is a negation of something undesirable.

People often describe preferences in buildings in this way. They say, for example, "'I like it not too hot." rather than "I like to be comfortable". The emphasis is on getting rid of something they don't want or like, rather than the presence of something that they do.

In the same way, people prefer 'absence of discomfort' to 'comfort', and lack of unwanted interruptions is better than, say, quiet. The message is: "We understand what we don't like, not necessarily what we do".

By implication this comes with a sub-text: "Give us the means to get rid of things we don't like *ourselves*." So better user controls (light switches, blind controls, for instance) or, as in the case of the 'trapped' comment, more freedom to leave, should they so wish.

The vocabulary of building users is different from building providers. Users' perspectives on needs is based on their experience of what they know about, so 'not too hot', 'less noise' and 'less artificial light' is their normal way of putting things. They are describing needs rather than wants, concentrating on the actual circumstances rather on a notional ideal.

This is one of the reasons why designers and users so often seem to be at odds with one another. Designers tend, or are forced by standards and regulations, to think in terms of creating optima, but users experience and express things in terms of their perceptions of reality: 'unhappy' or 'discomfort' rather than "happy" or "comfort"!

People often appear to be negative and complain a lot. Personal meters seem to be calibrated to degrees of unhappiness or discomfort. The mindset is that of the last bad experience not the last good one. People notice when conditions are not 'just right' and react when they are prevented from doing what they want. People do not seek after perfection: they just want things to be *good*

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[2] This comment came from a British building, but almost exactly captured similar sentiments from users in an Australian building that we were studying at the same time.

enough for them to be able to carry out their tasks effectively. They are usually satisficers, not optimisers.

Means of escape

So what is so special about the 'escape' comment?

- *Building-related absenteeism* Everyone knows that people go absent from work because of poor conditions in their workplace. There are other reasons, of course, but poor workplace conditions come high on the list. You have probably done it yourself. But because people obviously lie about absenteeism it is quite hard to gauge the true effect of an under-performing building. Attempts to use data on sickness leave are usually doomed because these will also include genuine illnesses, not just building-related absences, and they will be triggered after a period of absence (2 or 3 days) not just minutes or hours, for example, when people might go home early because they are feeling under-the-weather. So they will miss the shorter absences. In larger organisations with several buildings, it can also quite hard to 'map' illness data onto specific buildings, so data, if they exist at all, can be 'noisy' and inconclusive. If we can understand more about escape behaviour this should also get us closer to the true picture on building-related absenteeism.

- *Where people sit* Window seat or aisle? Sunny or shady? With your back to a main circulation route or facing? Within sight and earshot of workgroup colleagues? View out? Own room? Next to sources of random disturbance like breakout spaces or banging doors? The favoured options, and still a sign of status, although this has been changing, are a separate or enclosed workstation facing south-west [3], and located in the 'deepest space' high in the building or at the furthest distance from colleagues. The locations people like to avoid are the middle of the open plan, in high desk densities, with lots of disturbance, little individual user control, and gridded desk layouts. The least favoured are those where your escape options are lowest.

- *Control* This is not just access to working and effective physical controls for heating, cooling, ventilation and glare, but control over your own time, so that you can choose where and when to carry out your work, hold meetings, and have options over where you can go during breaks and lunchtime. People assume that the more physical control they have available to them, the better conditions will be. This is not necessarily so, as controls which do not work properly will frustrate the user just as much as when controls are absent altogether. Poor physical control increases the desire to escape. Other factors can be at work here. Employees tied to performance targets may be forced to stay at their desks for much longer than they would like, for instance. A typical situation is where people are forced to work longer hours than they might wish because of peer-group pressure or because of an intensive work culture which frowns on time-servers.

- *Access to open space* "Need to get out into fresh air and walk in [the park] daily." is a version of: "Need to get out at lunchtime into the fresh air and away from my colleagues". Surprisingly, this is often easier in city centres, where parks and open spaces can be relatively plentiful (but not always, of course), than in newer business parks (sic), where they are often not. There are also cultural and climatic differences. In Australia, for

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[3] In the northern hemisphere, and provided that there is reasonable control over, for example, low winter sun.

example, occupants give buildings better health ratings [4] and they spend less time in buildings which suggests, tentatively, that cultural and climatic reasons connected with the outdoor lifestyle are at work.

- *Lifestyle, location and logistics* Average journal-to-work and journey home times (including both journeys) can be as low as half an hour and up to over two hours. [5] Although we have not been able yet to show statistically an effect of journey times on workplace performance, there must obviously be a toll on people with the longer commutes. [6] There may also be other consequences: for example, in central London staff servicing buildings have to travel longer distances because of higher housing costs in the central area. Flexible working hours, including part-time hours, may help here, especially with the complications of families and their management, but where flexible hours may assist, longer commutes may cancel this out. Building location could be a reason for greater absenteeism and 'sickies', not just the conditions in the buildings themselves. Either way this is another angle on escape behaviour.

- *People don't like work very much* Another undercurrent in users' comments on buildings is: "I just want to get on with my work with the least possible hassle, and then go home. I do not want to have to worry about the building." This is a variation on; "I don't really want to be here". Of course, this may be more about the job and job satisfaction than the building, but it is often criticism of the building that is the symptom of the job malaise. The message for designers is: "Users do not care so much about the things that you as designers think are important." They want their basic needs met so they can carry out their work properly (desk space, storage, efficient archiving, etc) and then go home as soon as possible. Aesthetics tend to come much lower down in users' priorities than designers might like to think. The bottom line is that many do not want to be there at all!

- *User needs are not the main priority* In some building types working conditions may be quite poor. These include banks and certain types of shops, where customer service and perceived commercial and marketing requirements may win out over, for example, a healthy and comfortable workplace for the staff. Here, staff may be given relatively short periods of time, with plenty of breaks, to help ameliorate discomfort and unhealthy conditions.

- *Densities are too high* Designers are often under instructions to use space as efficiently as possible, which usually means higher workstation densities. They are also increasingly required to provide buildings which create conditions for higher staff productivity. The mantra of building briefs usually requires both, with better productivity usually wrapped in with the requirement for healthier workspaces with less environmental impact. Achieving all of of these in one large building is a tough call. The problem is that one system (space planning for higher occupant densities, for example) tends to be fighting another (better indoor environmental and amenity quality) which can also be fighting a third (unnecessarily complex services and systems) which fight against a fourth (lower carbon footprints). This will all be happening within a deep-plan form which itself imposes constraints on natural ventilation provision, daylighting, and proximity to windows with nice views out - all

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[4] Using the BUS Methodology database, health ratings average 3.46 on a 1-7 (1=unhealthy; 7=healthy) scale in the UK, and 3.69 in Australia. The Australia average is higher (i.e. better). People also spend less time in buildings in Australia (7.3 hours a day) compared with 7.9 hours a day in the UK.

[5] From BUS Methodology occupant surveys. The BUS Methodology may be licensed by all-comers. Postgraduate students receive the service for no charge. There is a charge for others. Contact Adrian Leaman either at adrian.leaman@arup.com or adrianleaman@usablebuildings.co.uk .

[6] It is also dangerous to assume that all commuting journeys may necessarily be bad. Walkers and cyclists often report very positively on their journeys-to-work, and certain types of commuting - uninterrupted ferry trips or pleasurable rail trips - may be a bonus.

attributes that occupants say they like most. Given that many modern buildings have been systematically removing the very features that occupants like best, it is hardly surprising that people seem keen to escape.

Meeting users' needs

Need can also be stated in terms of relative absences. Need is the *lack* of something required to do something properly. Relative absence defines importance (you know that something is important when it is not there).

Assumptions and needs are linked. For example, clients for buildings often (rightly) assume that designers will create a healthy, roomy, safe, comfortable, controllable and energy-efficient building because they think that these factors are obvious 'givens' and there is no need to ask for them explicitly. Clients then get a nasty shock when they find that these things have not been fully provided for. So it is vital not only to state needs as clearly as possible at the briefing stage, but also tease out who is assuming what about whom early in the process. In this way expectations can be managed - no nasty shocks or myopia, for instance.

Our experience is that needs are never fully met. For instance, the best-performing building in the BUS UK dataset still has 21 per cent of users saying that they adjust their behaviour because of the conditions in the building. In the worst-performing, this goes over 70 per cent. Which brings us back to our escapees. One of the answers to our question about whether respondents changed behaviour as a result of conditions in the building was:

> "As much as possible. I get out of the building as much as possible,
> get in as late as possible, and leave as early as possible."

… which says it all really!