

Windows Overlooking Life

Rooms without a view become prisons for the people who have to stay in them.



When people are in a place for any length of time, they need to be able to refresh themselves by looking at a world different from the one they are in, and with enough of its own variety and life to provide adequate refreshment.

There is no direct psychological evidence for this conjecture. But there

are several sources of indirect evidence, plus our intuition that this is a pattern of fundamental importance.

Brian Wells, studying office workers' choice of working positions found that 81% of all subjects chose positions next to a window. (*Pilkington Research Unit, Office Design: A Study of Environment, Department of Building Science, University of Liverpool, [Peter Manning, Ed.] 1965, pp. 118-121.*) Many of these subjects gave "daylight" rather than "view" as a reason for their choice. But is shown elsewhere in the same report, that subjects who are far from windows, grossly overestimate the amount of daylight they receive as compared with artificial light – in essence they cannot tell the difference between daylight and artificial light. (*Pilkington Research Unit, op.cit., p. 58.*) This suggests strongly that people really want to be near win-

dows for some other reason – not because of daylight. We cannot be sure that it's because of view – but it seems likely. The conjecture is made even more likely by the fact that people are less interested in sitting near windows which open onto light wells, which admit daylight, but present no view.

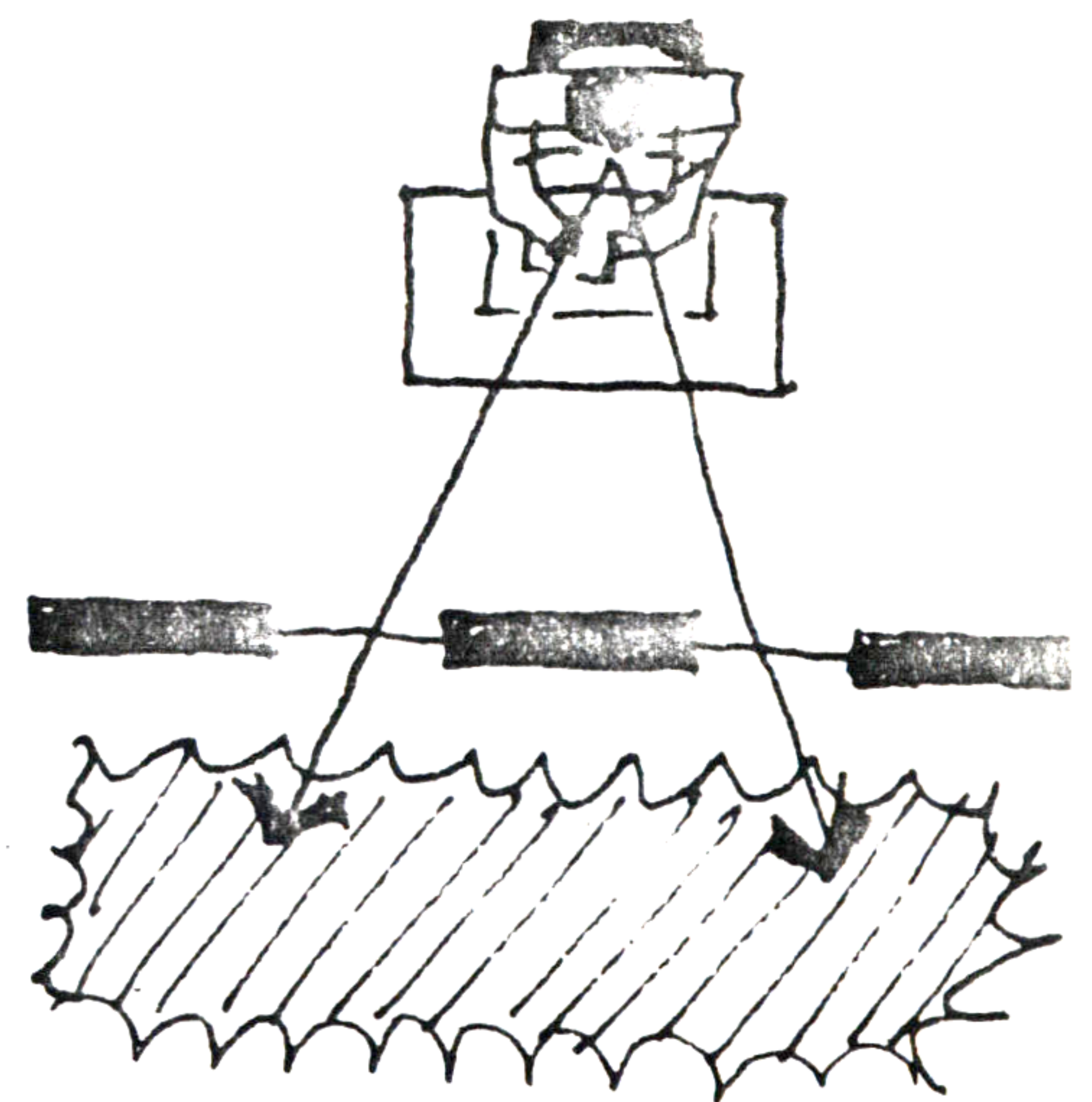
The most comprehensive study of view from windows, is by Markus.

He presents evidence which shows clearly that office workers prefer windows with meaningful views (i.e. views of city life, and views which present the city in relation to surroundings) as against views which also take in large areas, but contain uninteresting, and less meaningful, elements like bombed sites and parking lots and industrial sites. (*Thomas A. Markus, "The Function of Windows: A Reappraisal", Building Science, 2, 1967, pp.97-121; see especially p.109.*)

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Therefore: Give each place where a person is likely to spend any amount of time (e.g. a workplace) a view out, onto some other place, with life as different as possible from the life within. ■■■ Divide the windows into a number of different openings – at least a foot or so between openings.

■■■■ Bring the windows down as low as possible, sometimes all the way down to the floor – especially if the place in question is above the ground.



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Problem (continued)

First, another source of indirect evidence:

Amos Rapoport gives written descriptions of three windowless seminar rooms at the University of California. The descriptions are by teachers and students of English, asked to write descriptions of the rooms as part of an exercise in creative writing. The descriptions are heavily loaded with negative content, and in many cases refer directly to the windowless, boxed-in, or isolated-from-the-world character of the rooms.

Examples are:

Room 5646 is an unpleasant room in which to attend class because in it one feels detached and isolated from the rest of the world under the buzzing fluorescent lights and the high sound-proofed ceilings, amid the sinks, cabinets, and pipes, surrounded by empty space.

The large and almost empty, windowless room with its sturdy, enclosing, and barren grey walls inspired neither disgust nor liking; one might easily have forgotten how trapped one was. (*Amos Rapoport, "Some Consumer Comments on a Designed Environment", Arena - The Architectural Association Journal, January, 1967, pp. 176-178.*)

Now let us assume that people do need to be able to look out of windows, at some world different from their immediate surroundings.

The question then arises:

What size and shape of windows will best satisfy this demand?

Markus (*op.cit.*, pp. 103-109) makes the following points.

1. Since the ground usually has the most interesting things on it, and people want to see interesting things going on — not just walls of nearby buildings, or sky — the window sill should be as near the floor as possible — especially in upper storeys. This becomes even more important, when we consider the way a view is diminished in a room with window sills at today's standard heights, as the observer goes back away from the window. (Note: With low sills there is some chance that people in upper stories will not feel safe. This can be overcome by means of a rail in front of the window, or by making the windows very small, or by letting panes divide a large window into many small sections.)
2. Since the apparent variety and interest of the outside world depends on the number of different scenes that are visible, not on the size of the visible scene, several narrow windows are better than one large one.



It seems, therefore, that the windows should be:

1. Oriented towards a view of life.
2. Narrow and separate.
3. Tall, with window sills down to the floor.

Context:

This pattern applies to almost every internal space where people spend more than a few moments at a time (especially workplaces which usually fail to solve the problem).

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This pattern is tentative. If you have any evidence to support or refute its current formulation, please send it to the Center for Environmental Structure, P.O. Box 5156, Berkeley, California 94705; we will add your comments to the next edition.