

Information-Conversation

In many buildings, the information facility is either so hidden that you cannot find it,



or it is so imposing that it gives you a "watchdog" feeling, rather than a "welcome" one.

The following demands control the form on information stations:

1. In any public building serving the community, it is essential that people feel free to go in and out without explaining themselves to anyone.
2. On the other hand, there will be people who will need information immediately upon entering the building; if an information source is

not instantly available, they will feel disoriented.

3. There will be some lonely people who just want to stop and talk with the information attendant, without committing themselves, in any formal sense, to using the building.
4. People who are coming to use the station will want an instant to collect their thoughts as they approach. This is impossible if the in-

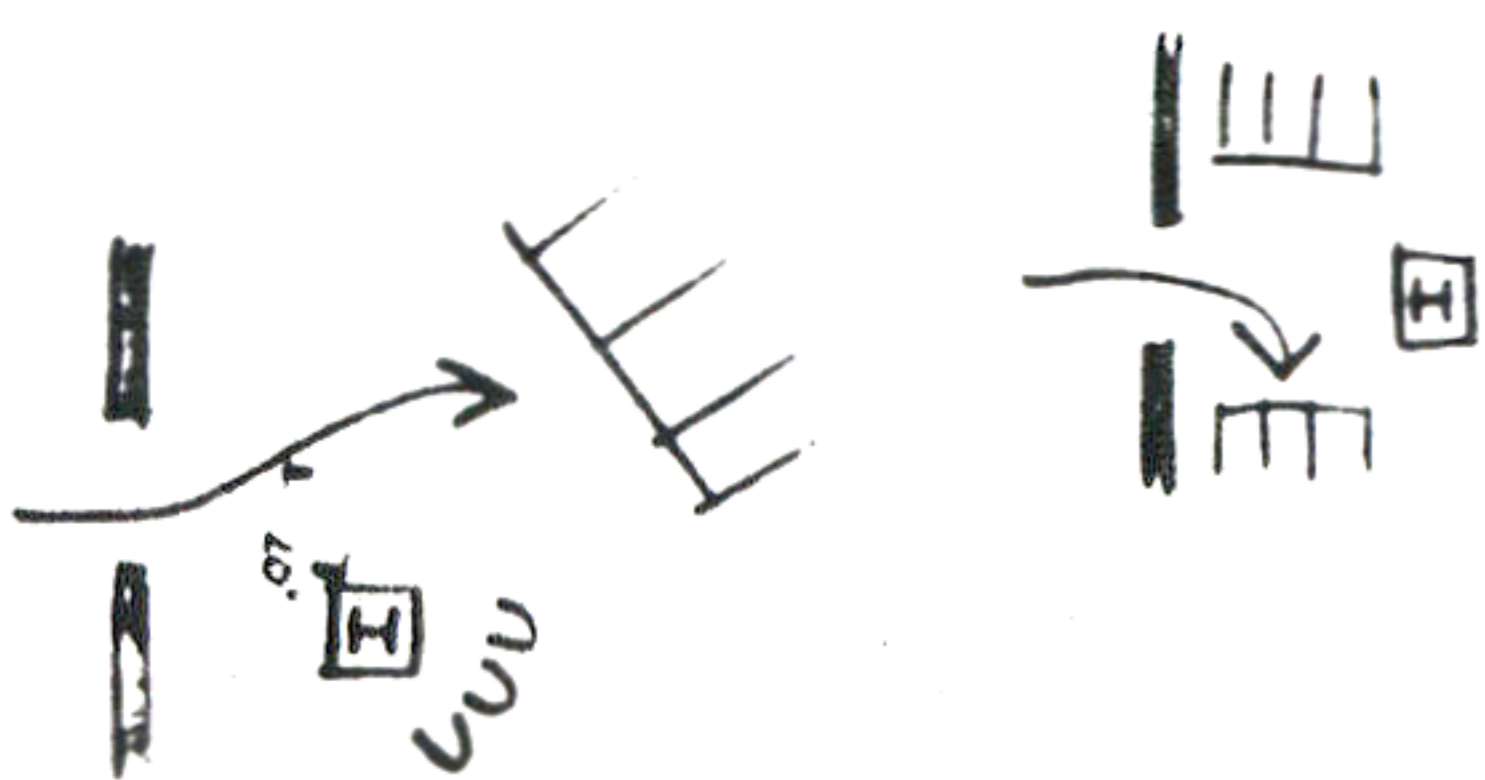
formation attendant is right on top of the door.

5. In some buildings the information station can become a major hub of activity. This can happen for example, in a community service center where the information attendant becomes a kind of community "mother" — dispensing coffee and gossip.

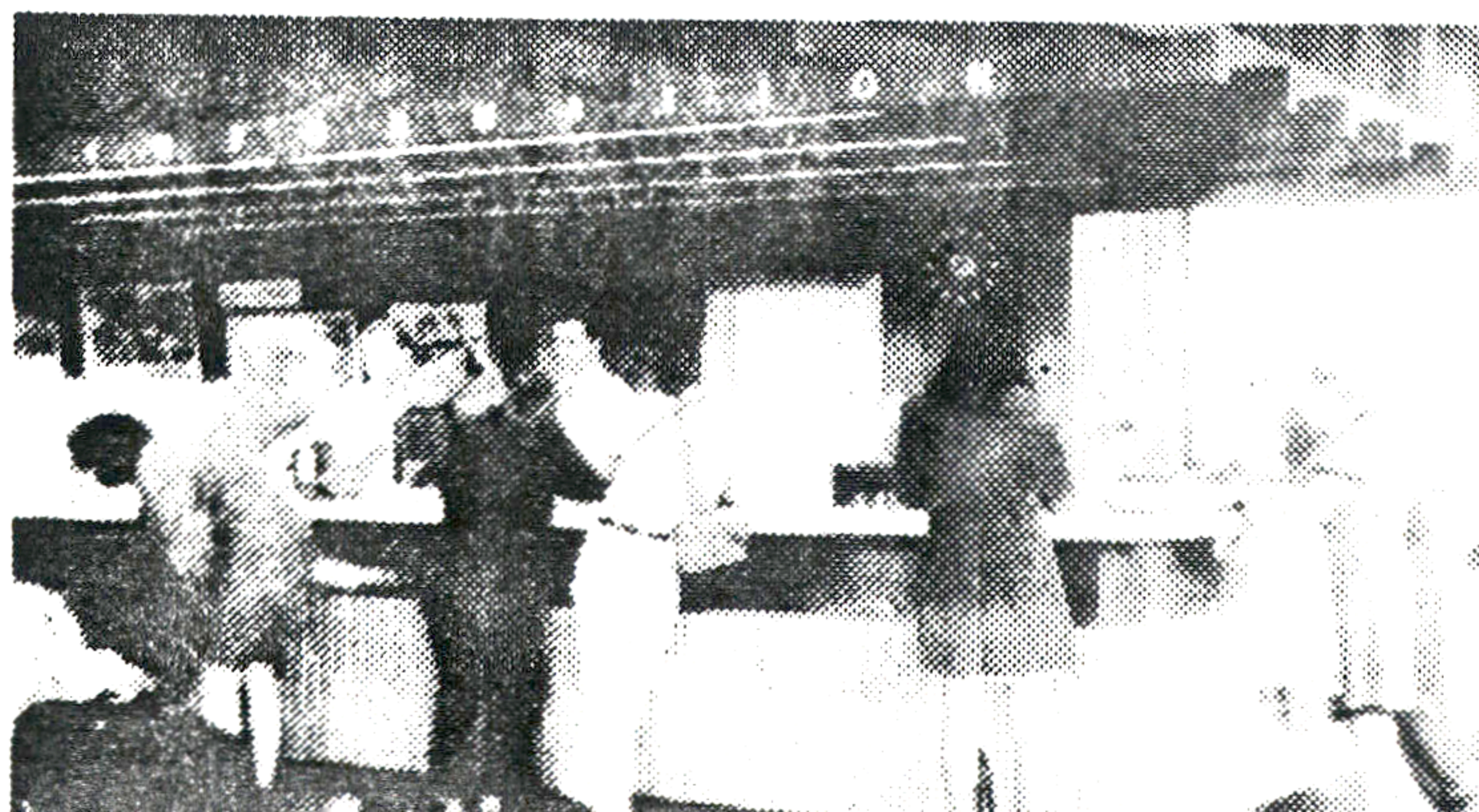
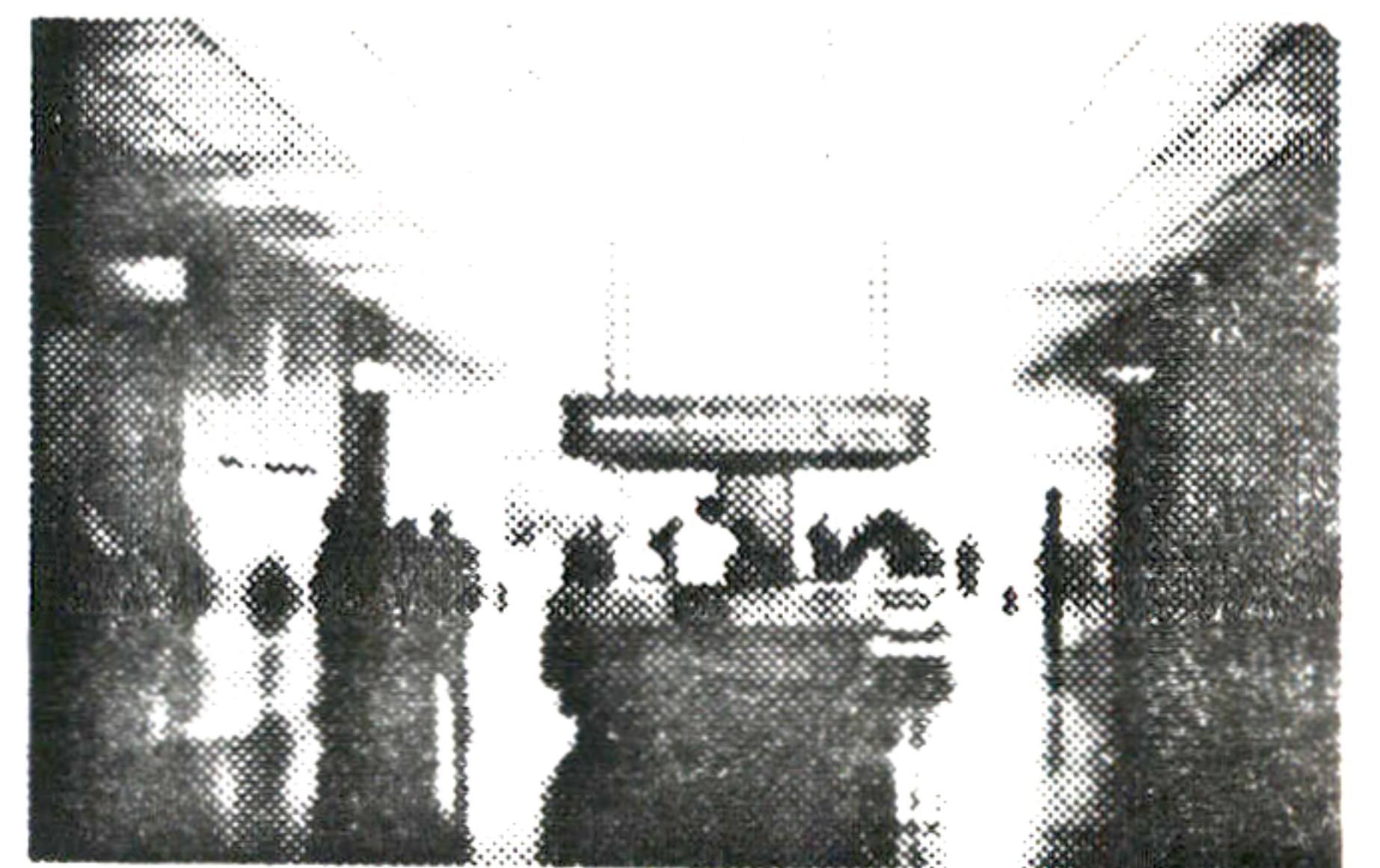
(continued over)

Therefore:

1. *Make the station clearly visible and accessible from all major entrances to the building, and mark it INFORMATION, so it is legible from the entrances.*



2. *Locate the station so that direct paths from entrances to services is at least 20 feet from it, and so that the path from entrances to station is at least 30 feet long. Make the station visible and immediate to everyone in the public waiting area.*



3. *Make the station a counter, with newspapers and information sheets, and if possible, coffee, available on it. Place loosely arranged seats nearby.*

Information – Conversation

Problem (continued)

The derivation of the solution from these five points is direct:

1. If the information desk is placed close to entrances, so that people have to walk past it, it may seem to be guarding the building. This happens more often than one might think. Even though a receptionist may be pleasant and kind, she will often have orders to question people who come in—or may even just do it as a way of “trying to do a good job”. Thus, the information desk should be located so that people voluntarily go to it, and so that there is no chance of it becoming a check point.

2. In some buildings it is often difficult to find the information facility because it is too deep in the building with other services and standing people in between it and the entrances or because it is not clearly marked as information. For people wanting it immediately upon entering, the information counter must be highly visible and clearly marked.

3. Alfred Kahn, et al, in their proposal for information centers, supports the fact that some people are lonely and simply need some kind of contact:

“The inquirer might not be prepared to accept advice, referral or steering or might not need it. The entire service might consist of occasional friendly ‘chats’ or the giving of reassurance, which keeps a dependent or slightly disturbed person functioning in the community.” (Alfred Kahn, et al, *Neighborhood Information Centers, Columbia University, School of Social Work, 1966, p. 34.*)

For these people the information desk should be easily accessible from the street, and designed to allow and sustain casual conversation.

We have observed, informally, that people are more apt to talk

freely in these situations if they are talking over a counter, just above their waist, that is, about 40” high. Obviously they will feel freer if the counter is a coffee counter—it gives them an ostensible reason for being there. When the station is simply a desk, people will tend not to linger there; they will get their information and move on.

Further, the information person should not have any other job to do, besides giving out information. Normally receptionists are doing some office chore when they are not giving help, and they do not invite casual conversation.

4. It is generally unpleasant to confront a receptionist face to face, immediately upon entering a building. Thus the station should be set back about 30 feet from the entrance to give people a chance to collect their thoughts and glance around as they approach. (This figure is based on intuition; in his specifications for an office entrance Barry Poyner suggests a similar figure—40 feet; see Barry Poyner, “The Office Entrance” in Poyner and Alexander, *The Atoms of Environmental Structure, Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, London, England, 1966, p. 112.*)

5. An example of the information station being the nerve center for all that happens in the building is in the Peckham Health Center:

“As prominent as the centrally placed swimming pool is the ‘pool of information’ into which members from the first moment of joining are invited to dip.

This pool of information is primarily located in the physiological department, popularly called the ‘medical department’, where the family overhauls take place. But as the Centre has grown and as staff and members alike have come through practice with a new instru-

ment to know more of its use and possibilities, it has become clear that *all action* in the building is illuminated by knowledge from this source. Facts which the member-family first meets with in the physiological department are continuously being digested through experience in action throughout the building, added to through contact with the staff in all other departments and confirmed through association with other member-families grown familiar with their meaning and with the use of this source of information. Unlike the casual visitor then, those who dip into this ‘pool’ do not mistake the main drift of what they find in the Centre; while some in a short four years have come to sense the far-reaching significance of the service.” (Innes Pearse and Lucy Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1946, p. 79.*)

Thus, the information station, in order to become the hub of activity, must be centrally located to the public waiting area, so that it is visible and immediate to everyone using the service.

By: Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein.

July 1968 revised June 1970

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.