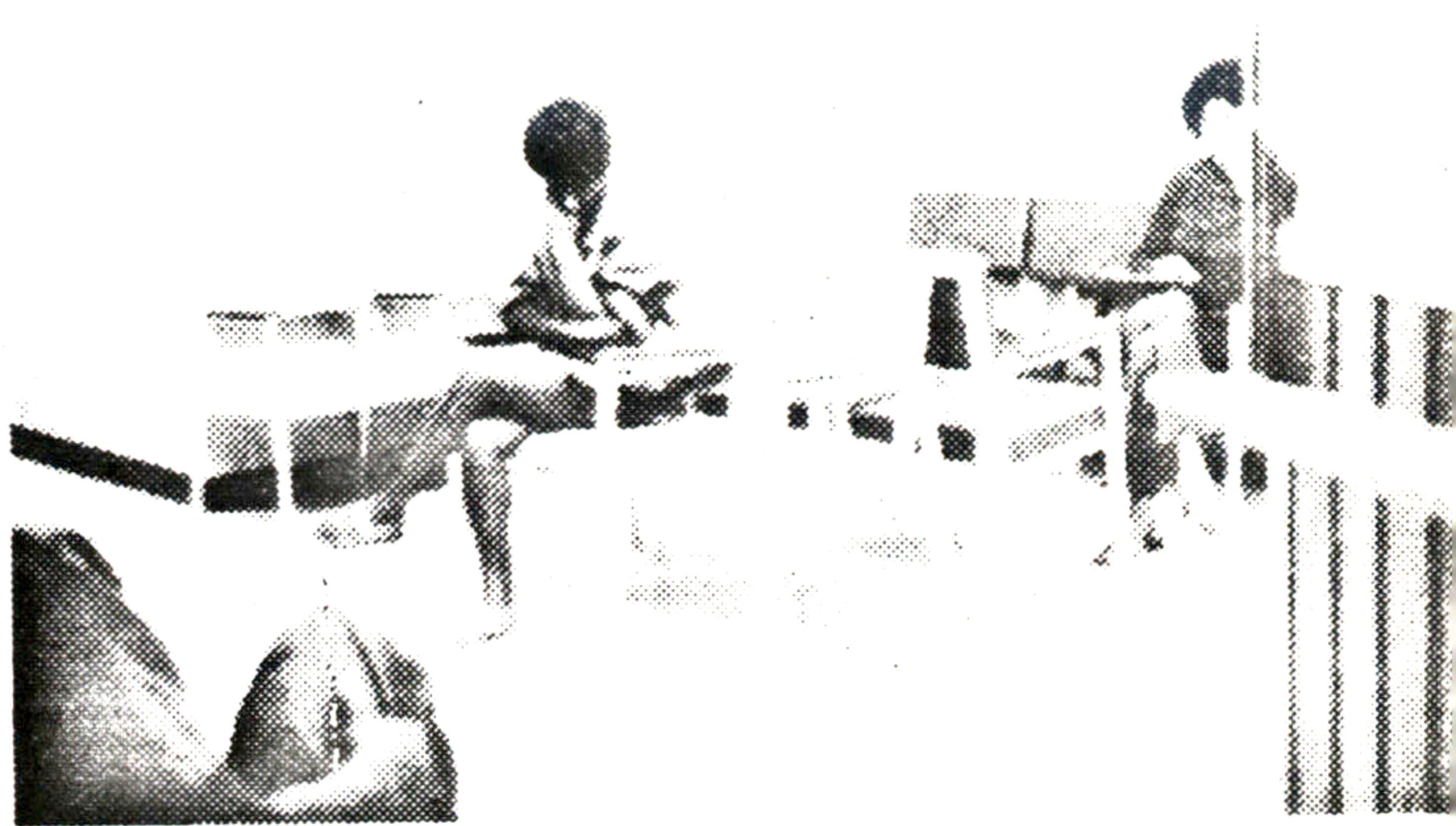


# Free Waiting

*Large institutions with busy professionals subject their clients to endless waiting; this waiting has a deadening effect on people.*



This problem arises in the following way:

Interviewers squeeze as many interviews as possible into a tight schedule. But the exact length of any one interview is unpredictable. This means clients will inevitably be kept waiting.

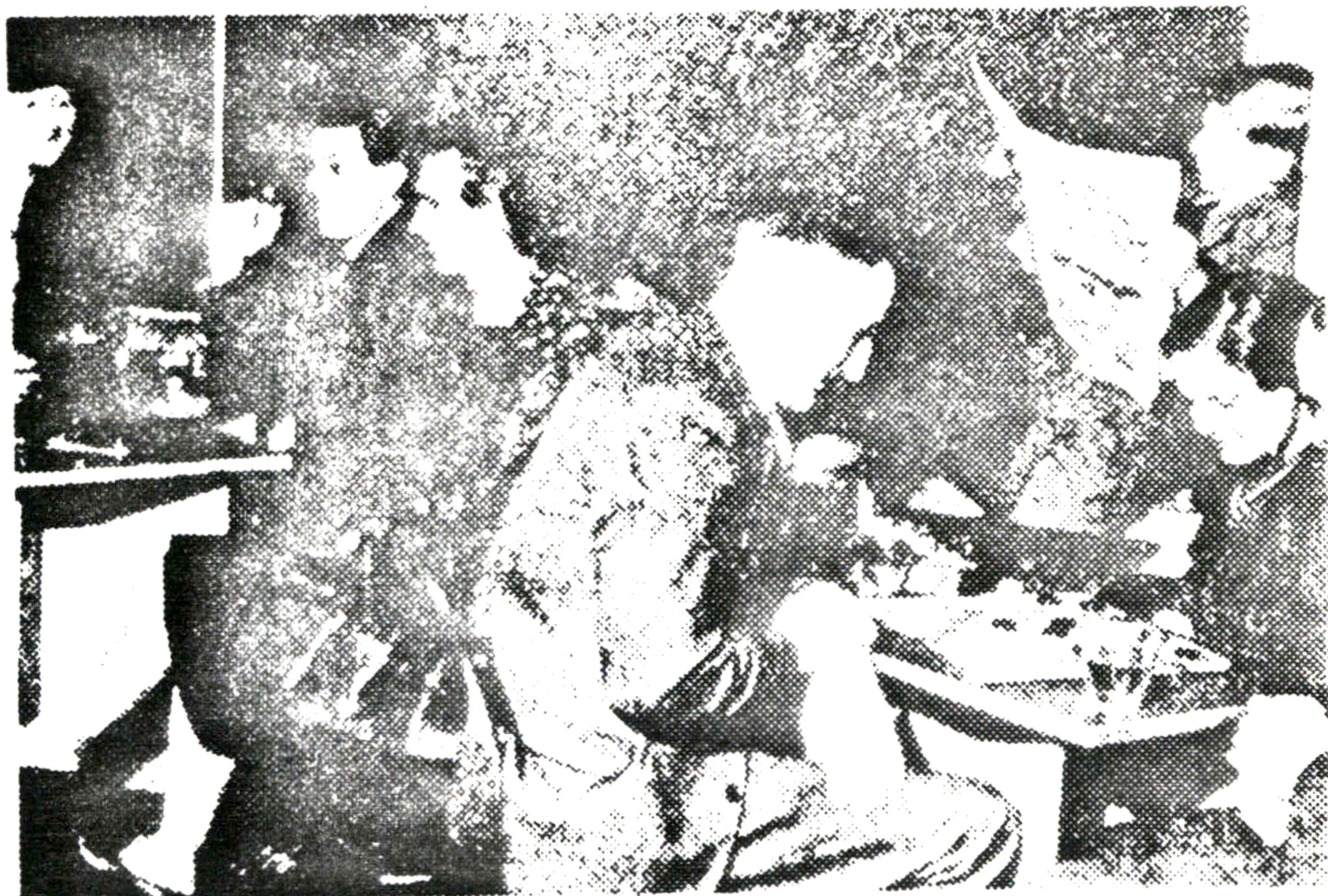
Further, since people never know exactly when their turn will come, they cannot even take a stroll or sit outside. They must stay in the narrow confine of the waiting room, waiting their turn. But this, of

course, is an extremely demoralizing situation: Nobody wants to wait at somebody else's beck and call. (Kafka's greatest works, *The Castle* and *The Trial*, both deal almost entirely with the way this kind of atmosphere destroys a man.)

Evidence for the deadening effect of waiting comes from Briar's study (*Scott Briar, "Welfare From Below: Recipients' Views of the Public Welfare System"*, in *Jacobus Tenbroek, Ed., The Law and the Poor*, Chandler Publishing Company, San

*Francisco, 1966, p. 52.*) We all know that time seems to pass more slowly when we are bored or anxious or restless. Briar found that people waiting in welfare agencies always thought they had been waiting for longer than they really had. Some overestimated their waiting time as much as four times.

For most people the best antidote for the waiting feeling is to get involved with something interesting that has nothing whatever to do with waiting. (continued over)



offices



activities

*Therefore:  
Place a number of seats within sight of the interview office (use the average number of people waiting at any one time plus a safety factor). Place exhibits and reading material near the seats. Connect the exhibit and seating area to a larger open area, with activities for waiters and non-waiters alike (e.g. public arena, pool tables, coffee counter). Equip this larger area with a public address system, for calling people to their appointment.*



# Free Waiting

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## Problem (continued)

Appropriate waiting activities will vary from institution to institution. In a multi-service center, the public arena, the child care center, pool tables, checkers, coffee, would all qualify. In a medical center activities might include a swimming pool.

Even if people do not participate directly in these activities they should still have the chance to watch them. People feel less bored waiting when they are able to watch other people doing things.

Clearly, then, this larger activity area must be open to people who are not waiting, as well.

There will always be some clients who are especially anxious about missing their turn or being forgotten. These clients usually want to keep watch over the door of the interviewer, both so that they can see when he is ready, and also to make sure that they are seen by him. There must therefore be seats immediately outside each interviewer's door, each seat visible from the door. For these clients, the problem of boredom and confinement cannot be solved by going out into the activity area. However, since watching people helps, each seat must command a view of the activity area. Above all, the seats must not be enclosed in "blind" areas typical of waiting rooms today.

In summary then, people who are waiting must be free to do what they want. If they want to sit outside the interviewer's door, they can. If they want to get up and take a stroll, or play a game of pool, or have a cup of coffee, or watch other people, without having to fear that they are losing their place in

line, they can.

## Context

Any large institution where clients have to wait for appointments and interviews. This includes hospitals, medical centers, multi-service centers, offices, faculty areas of university departments, government agencies.

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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.*