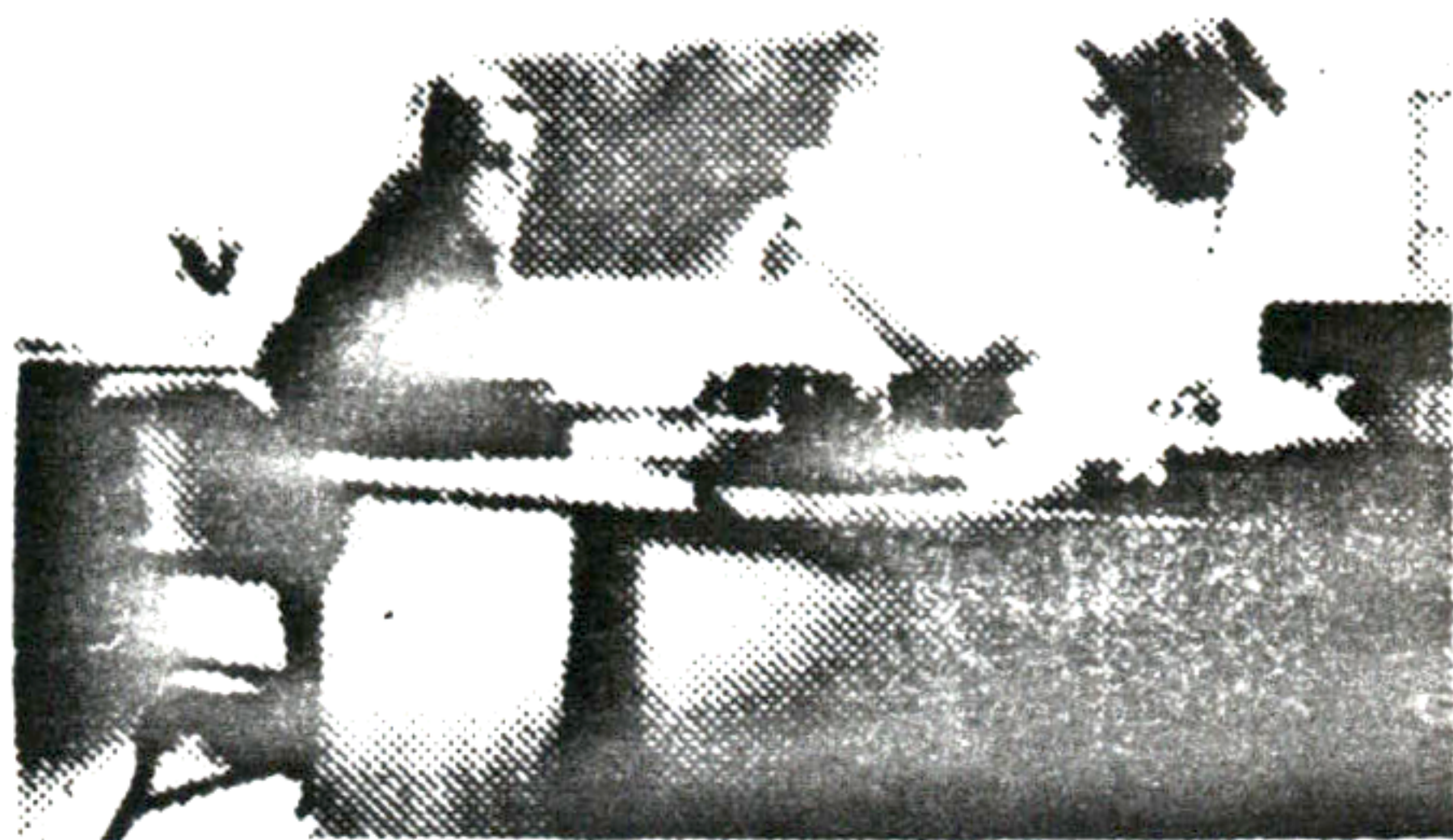


*You can't have a personal talk  
in a typical office setting.*



There are a number of reasons for this. Most basically the traditional office setting puts you immediately on your guard; it is official territory. The space clearly belongs to someone else; you are in the space on the "owner's time" and the burden is on you to make your point and get out. This is an impossible situation for personal interviews and counseling. Furthermore, in the usual office, the interview is carried

on over a fat desk; and this too, puts a client off.

A study by Robert Sommer suggests that an across-the-corner position is far more natural than an across-the-desk position. He shows that there is more frequent interaction between people sitting across the corner of a table, than between people sitting directly across the table, or side-by-side. He found that people entering a cafeteria to have a talk consistently chose the across-the-corner position. (Robert Sommer, "Studies in Personal Space", *Sociometry*, 22, September, 1959, pp. 247-260.)

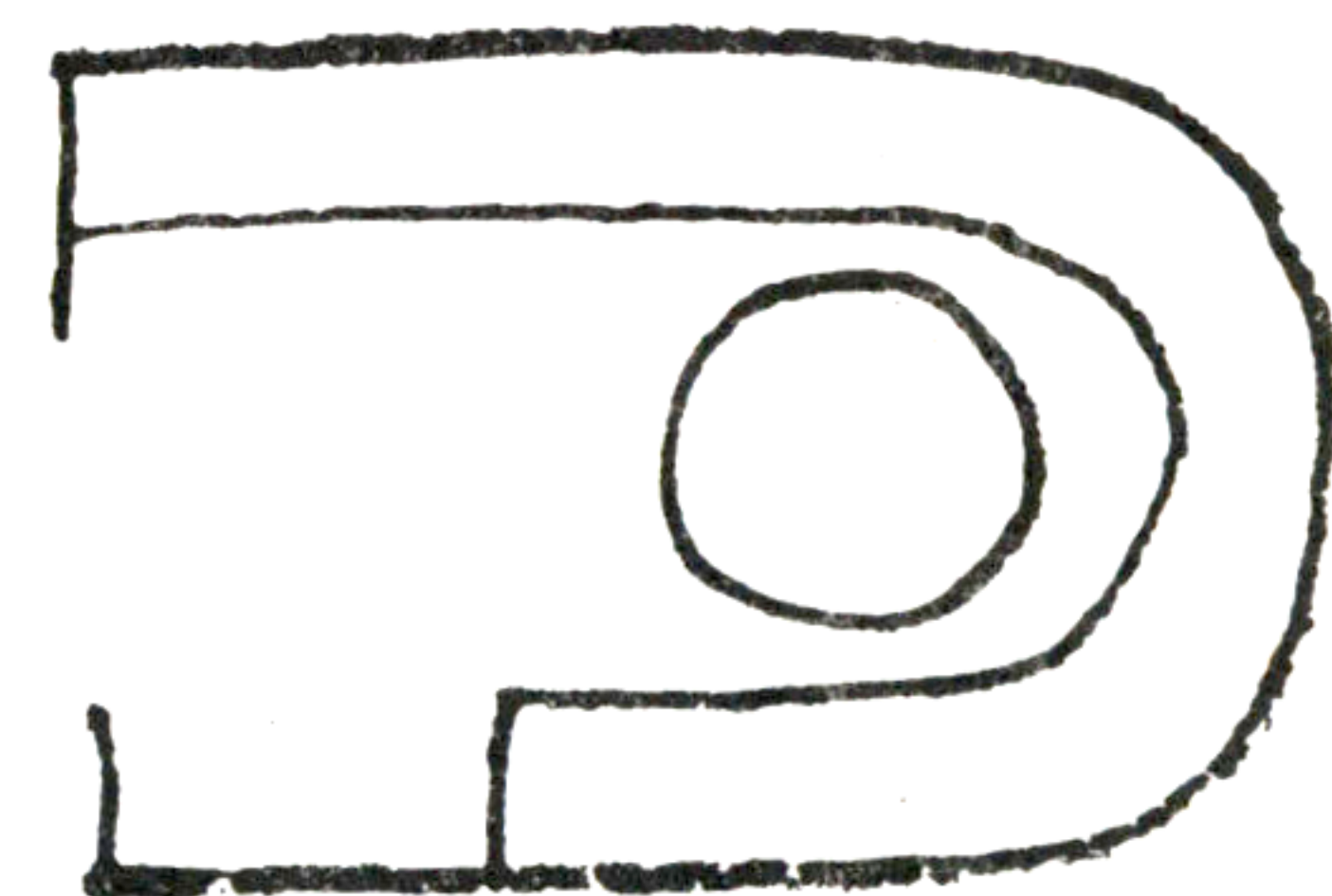
Another problem with the office is its size; if it is too big people tend to sit so far apart that confidential conversation can't get off the

ground. Hall and Sommer both give figures of approximately 3-5' for low volume, confidential conversation. (Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, Doubleday, New York, 1959, pp. 163-4; Robert Sommer, "The Distance for Comfortable Conversations: A Further Study", *Sociometry* 25, 1962, pp. 111-116.)

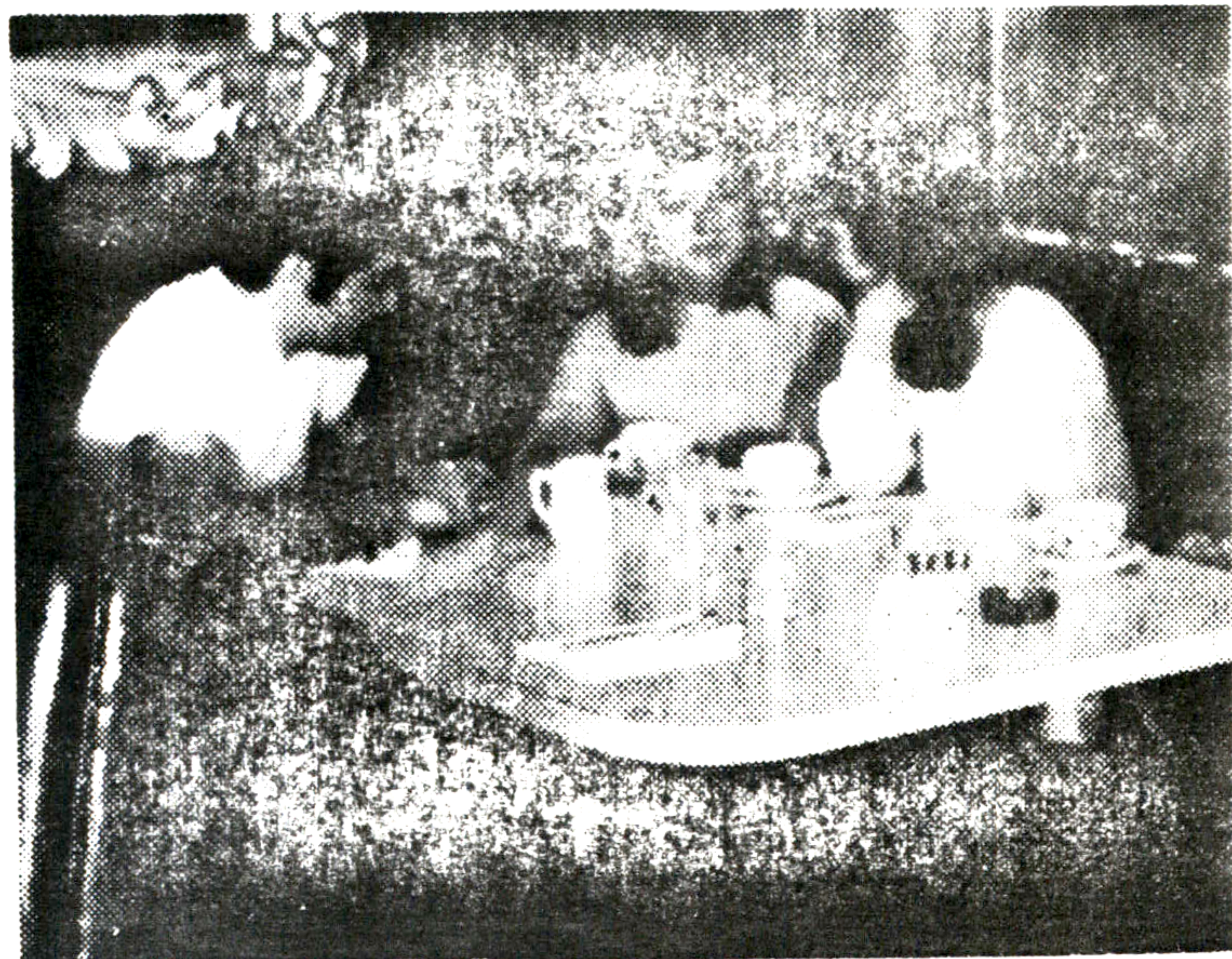
Thus, we have three ways in which the setting can fail:

1. It is "official space" — owned by the institution;
2. interviews are taken over a fat desk; and
3. the tendency to pull back takes over, and people end up sitting so far apart that they can't establish a confidential tone. (continued over)

## *Interview Booths*



*Therefore: Make the interview setting like an enclosed restaurant booth; make the entrance to the booth wide enough for two people to enter simultaneously; place a table, not a desk, that is round or roughly square within this booth; and wrap a continuous sofa-like seat round half this table; make the table not more than 3½ feet across; and carpet the booth.*





# Interview Booths

## Problem (continued)

The requirements for a good interview setting:

1. The area must be acoustically private; no feeling that passers-by can overhear the conversation.
2. People should be sitting at angles to each other, with a desk corner between them, or such that an easy adjustment of seats puts a desk corner between them.
3. Interviewer and client should sit in similar seats, equally comfortable.
4. Interviewers want their files instantly at hand.
5. Client and interviewer should approach the interview area at the same time.
6. The area should have a sense of neutrality, like a park bench or a restaurant booth.

(See Clifford E. Erickson, *The Counseling Interview*, Prentice-Hall, New York, 1950, p. 53; and Dugald S. Arbuckle, *Counseling: An Introduction*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1961, p. 265.)

7. Interviewer and client are, at most, 5 feet away from each other with the possibility of getting closer.

On this last point we quote Sommer (*op cit.*):

"The present study is an outgrowth of the previous investigation of the distance for comfortable conversation. In that study, pairs of subjects were asked to go into an attractively furnished lounge and sit on two couches that faced one another and discuss a given topic. They had a

choice of sitting side-by-side on the same couch or across from one another on different couches. . . . We found that when the couches were less than 3½' apart, the subjects sat across from one another on different couches, but at a distance greater than this, the subjects sat side-by-side on the same couch. Since our previous work had shown that people preferred sitting across from one another rather than side-by-side, we felt that the point at which subjects first started sitting side-by-side on the same couch indicated the distance at which the couches were too far apart for comfortable conversation. Under these conditions, the distance for comfortable conversation would be 3½ feet between couches or 5½ feet between people (since people's heads were approximately one foot behind the front of each couch)."

As we see it, these requirements add up to an interview booth, or something like it. The booth has a continuous sofa-like seat wrapped around a table to establish the correct right angle position, equalize the seats, and allow for a corner to be pulled up between the participants, or pushed back accordingly.

The table and seat can be entered from both sides through a wide entrance — no one can sit "behind" this arrangement.

Each booth is outfitted with the materials an interviewer needs; and a shelf off to the side to store this stuff. For privacy, the booth must be acoustically insulated, perhaps with a ceiling and carpet.

## Context

The booth makes most sense in places where interviews of a personal nature involving small groups of people go on daily, e.g. multi-

service center, university, open-door health clinic; the experience of one counselor in a family clinic indicates that booths are *not* appropriate for meetings with families with lots of children. In this situation a larger space is required; a space with the booth's informal qualities, but where kids can move around freely and adults can stand up and pace.

By: Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein.

July 1968 revised September 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.