HOMES FIT FOR THE HANDICAPPED

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An ambitious book on the design of buildings for handicapped children here comes in for substantial, detailed criticism because of the reviewer's anxiety that it may become the standard reference book on the subject for architects. The confusion surrounding mental handicap goes a long way to explain why the book falls short of being a success.

The author aims 'to provide information helpful to designers and all who are concerned with environment for mentally handicapped children'. Although physical handicap is touched on, he acknowledges that this book is primarily directed towards the needs of children without physical handicap. He recognises that opinions differ on environmental needs and sets out 'to describe the field, to indicate these solutions and those features which are found to work well and to suggest promising lines for further development'. He makes no apology for labouring points of detail on outstanding faults in existing and newly designed buildings for the mentally handicapped.

I found the book to have many negative features. These arise mainly from Mr. Nellist's failure to distinguish the confusion in the field of mental handicap from his own confusions.

It is difficult to see how his aims are going to be achieved by such statements as: 'Mental handicap covers many problems and can include such conditions as brain damage, deformation, mental retardation leading to over-slow development, emotional disturbance, lack of adequate mental capacity—to mention only a few', or 'There is a minority—fortunately very small—of pathetic cot cases, grotesquely mis-shapen and deformed who are unable to move or co-ordinate movements and who are frightening and repulsive to the average person. For this unfortunate minority there is still little that can be done within the present level of knowledge'.

The first statement confuses the problem of the child—learning difficulties—with those of parents, teachers, etc. coping with a child whose rate of physical growth is not matched by development of 'normal' behaviour. It introduces the term 'brain damage', often used to mean different things by specialists within the field. The second dogmatically asserts the hopelessness of helping a category of mentally handicapped child—presumably those referred to on page 113 as 'little more than vegetables'. This type of assertion is also found on pages 15 and 16. Under the heading 'Special care' he describes children 'who lack the equipment ever to improve very much' or '... who clearly can never be trained or educated ...' Statements like these ignore the question of how you assess educability unless you try to educate, and perpetuate the neglect of children whose observed progress denies the assertions.

The section on 'geographical and social distribution' includes: 'Numerically there are far too many such children ...' and 'Statistics are fragmentary ...' but gives neither an accepted definition of mental handicap nor any of the available statistics. It does not even discuss separately the severely subnormal (I.Q. under 50), who are distributed equally through the social strata of the community at the rate of about 4/1000 children, and the mildly subnormal or educationally subnormal who occur more frequently but predominantly in the Registrar General's social classes IV and V. This is not an epidemiological text but it is surprising that it addresses itself to the numbers of affected children in a community with reference to the planning implications yet ignores available data.

A section on pages 6 and 7 on 'Types of handicap' attempts to define difficult, ill-understood medical terms in what the author calls 'strictly non-medical terms'. Not surprisingly, it fails.

On page 7 the 'Aims of education' are described in four paragraphs which include: 'Conventional education or anything resembling it is largely useless'.

The section on 'Diagnosis' on pages 10 and 11 in the chapter on 'Solutions, types of buildings, general considerations' is confused and confusing. The remainder of this chapter is also marred by an attempt (in 9 pages) to describe, criticise and assert the organisation, functions and aims of junior training centres, special care units, nursery units, sheltered workshop, ESN schools, hospital units and combined facilities.

The section on overall planning criticises the stigmatisation of the mentally handicapped by the community and discusses, unhelpfully in my opinion, the effect this may have on siting the buildings.
The remainder of this section (2 pages) discusses the possible siting of schools, training centres and residential hostels in relation to the existing hospitals, existing schools or as detached units. This superficial treatment of the problem leads to assertions that the advantages of siting a residential centre for disturbed children near an existing hospital are: 'Staffing is made easier and medical care and supervision is readily at hand. Catering can be arranged easily through the centralised hospital catering organisation. Laundry... can also be arranged to advantage through the hospitals centralised plant. There is a flexible range of care possible... etc. etc. Staffing, catering and laundry problems of existing hospitals for the mentally handicapped are now receiving close attention because of the great difficulty experienced by these hospitals in providing these facilities, and the serious impact these shortages are having on the quality of care provided.

On page 24 the author presents an argument against siting schools for mentally handicapped children with 'normal' schools: 'For many mentally handicapped children, the most that can be achieved... is that they can learn to communicate, to read and write in relatively simple terms, to travel, to shop and to fend for themselves in society. They may learn to do a useful job which will give them a place in the community and self respect. A large number cannot even aspire to this. In these circumstances, it seems unlikely that many such children will ever be able to take their place in a normal school...' To me this seems a most confusing non-sequitur.

The author then asserts in a sentence the advantages of 'a comprehensive unit based on a village pattern... but gives no details.

In the section on 'Choice of site' (page 25) Mr. Nellist asserts that in the case of long-stay residential
units the problem of communications between the children's homes and the units 'does not arise and there is no particular reason for such buildings to be sited centrally, relative to the area which they serve'. I take this to mean that the child's parents, relatives and the community from which he comes have no place in the continuing care of their children once in residential care. This point needs arguing as it seems counter to the policies many people, including parents of handicapped children, would like to see implemented.

The section 'Area required' page 25 is confusing. Does 'Buildings are usually single storey' also mean that they should be? One acre for a junior training school of 100 children and a ½ acre site for a residential hostel of forty to fifty places seems much too little. It is also apparently contradicted by page 41, 'The proportion of open play space should be larger than that provided in normal schools'.

The remainder of the book has many reasonably sound ideas on internal design of rooms, finishes and fittings where these are not marred by arbitrary assertions on the aims of education e.g. p.29, p.37, p.39.

Figures could do with more explanation and the photographs are seldom commented on. On page 36, fig. 4—a plan for residential hostel for about 50 children shows no downstairs WC's, only 3 recreation rooms, i.e. 17 children per room when all rooms are being used, and no staff accommodation.

On pages 56-72 the author makes a plea for more research on the behaviour of the children in training schools. However, he confuses the role of the school head as head teacher and administrator, with that of a researcher, and suggests that the head's office be designed as a central research and observation laboratory equipped with the technology of research recording. The result is an over-elaborate office and an ill-designed but expensive research laboratory.

The section on services (p. 72-73) is marred by an obsession with doing away with domestic fittings which may be mishandled by the children. My experience is that, with adequate staff ratios, such fittings can be safely installed and the children can be taught not to mishandle them or be stopped when they do.

I have concentrated on the negative aspects of this book because, in the absence of other texts on this subject it is likely to become a standard reference for architects. They would be well advised to consult other works on the size and nature of the problem and the organisation of services. Before deviating from the design of similar buildings for 'normal' children and adults, they would be well advised to ask for more detailed reasons than are given by the author. With the exceptions mentioned, chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 could be useful.

A book on the design of units for the mentally handicapped which does not dismiss the needs of the profoundly retarded and people with socially difficult behaviour, which examines systematically the functions of all aspects of design for the child, his family, his friends and the staff caring for him still remains to be written. Mr. Nellist's book is, to that extent, a pioneer effort.

Planning buildings for handicapped children
by Ivan Nellist
Crosby Lockwood, 55s.