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Philip Thiel (1920-2014)

The interdisciplinary area of environmental psychology, now 50 years old, emerged from the collective efforts of an assemblage of non-traditional psychologists, designers, and social scientists who came together in the late 1960's. All involved felt similarly that their parent disciplines were not adequately addressing pressing human needs in everyday life occurring beyond the laboratory or the design studio. For this reason, they sought connections with one another and developed new ideas on the heels of these integrative efforts. Among this group of iconoclasts, Phil Thiel who passed away on May 10, 2014 at the age of 93, was surely among the most iconoclastic. Regular readers of this journal should be familiar with Phil Thiel's name because it has appeared as one of the journal's founders on the masthead of every issue of *Environment & Behavior* since its first appearance in 1969. Owing to his training as well as his intellectual and artistic interests, Phil developed a unique approach to studying how environments are experienced, and in view of that, how the human experience of environments can be enriched through design. This approach has yet to receive the attention it is due.

The background Phil brought to environment-behavior studies was unlike that of other participants in the field. His training was in naval architecture, which attuned Phil from early on to questions concerning movement through the world. His career interests soon broadened from the experience of moving across the surface of water to that of moving across surfaces within the structures of buildings and public spaces. A formative influence on Phil was the artist and theorist György Kepes, who recruited him to teach visual design at MIT. Under Kepes, Phil developed his singular skills for visual communication through drawing, which are fully on display in his books *Freehand Drawing* (1965) and *Visual Awareness and Design* (1981). Also, at MIT was Kevin Lynch who stressed that city design was a temporal art, that its structure and aesthetic character are revealed over time as individuals move

through it. [This insight continues to be overlooked by later admirers of Lynch's seminal book, *The Image of the City* (1960)]. Following a move to UC Berkeley in the 1950's, Phil became a colleague of MIT-trained Donald Appleyard, whose first book *The View from the Road* (1964), shared this same general perspective. Phil moved to the College of Architecture at the University of Washington in 1961 where he continued to pursue this line of thought. Phil's detailed studies of Japanese garden designs during several extended residencies in Japan further cemented his vision of the psychological significance of design for enriching the experience of moving through environments. In this regard, Phil departed from most other psychologists and designers (the perceptual psychologist James Gibson, a notable exception here) who remain fixed on thinking about the experience of the environment and environmental design in static terms.

Drawing on his interests in visual communication and architectural design, as well as through dedicated teaching of generations of design students, Phil recognized that an impediment to temporally-sensitive design was the absence of any system of visual communication that could be used by designers to capture the multi-dimensional experience of moving through built structures. With the example of music notation in mind, and inspired by experiments in dance notational systems, Phil began to develop a notational system of "experiential symbols" for describing the experience of moving through architectural spaces. His work in this vein was included in the first reader in environmental psychology (Proshansky, Ittelson, and Rivlin, 1970). During subsequent decades, Phil invested much of his efforts to the further development of this system, which was published in its final form in *People, Paths, and Purposes: Notations for a Participatory Envirotecture* (University of Washington Press, 1997). This book is also chock-full of insights, resources, and ideas about environmental perception and design.

Outside of academia, Phil was a community activist who worked tirelessly in the Seattle area, and particularly in the University District, to resist design and planning choices that would undermine

the quality of daily life for its residents. In this role, he raised local awareness of the human significance of environmental design.

Throughout his long life, Phil's love of boat design persisted. He invented and then built numerous pedal-powered wooden boats. These designs have attracted the attention of wooden boat enthusiasts world-wide. They are a remarkable blend of beauty and naval engineering acumen. For years, Phil was a fixture at the Center for Wooden Boats on Lake Union near his Seattle home.

A native of Brooklyn, Phil never lost his distinctive New York accent and style even after decades in the Pacific Northwest. An indefatigable critic of all manner of academic and bureaucratic humbug, Phil was an utterly charming and generous man who most enjoyed the company of his many close friends. His nearly annual trips to France to travel on its canals with an international cadre of friends were celebrations of fellowship, good food, and fine wine.

Little would have pleased Phil more than an awakening by the current generation of environmental psychologists and designers to the significance of environmental design that enriches our experience of moving through the world.

Harry Heft

Denison University