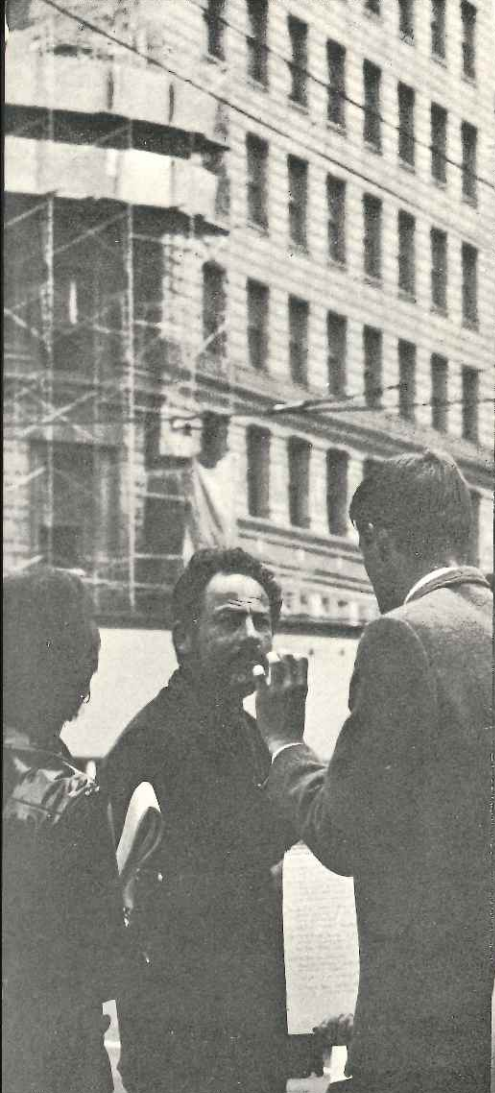




experiments





in environment

For 26 days last summer, a group of architectural students, architects, and dancers learned to feel their bodies in tension and space, to experience the sensual effects of a wild Pacific shore, a crowded urban plaza, a kinetic light happening, a pulsing rock-and-roll environment, the life and half-life of a major city street, and the intimate hidden life of an upland meadow and a dense redwood forest. They built their own "city" on the shore of the ocean and recreated the impact and atmosphere of a metropolis in a multimedia presentation. Dan-



cers became architects and architects became dancers. They became more intimately aware of immediate and generalized experiences of all sorts of environments, from that of a solitary person attuned to the high drone of insects in a country field to the shrill activity and subtle crowded danger of the nighttime city.

All of these things happened during a summer workshop given by landscape architect Lawrence Halprin and his dancer wife Ann that dealt with problems of perceiving the environment. The series of events, open to practicing professionals and graduate students and seniors in architecture, landscape architecture, and planning (Mrs. Halprin registered her dancers separately), operated under the appropriate title of "Experiments in Environment," for the intent was to provide not the usual academic collation of classroom lectures, slide shows of Philadelphia's renewal program, and two-hour seminars, but to "explore a new range of experience in avant-garde environmental arts." Halprin wrote in his announcement that almost all experiments would be in the field—at Sea Ranch on the coast, in the Mount Tamalpais chaparral and meadows, in the cities of the Bay Area. These landscapes and areas would be "evaluated through more intuitive modes of perception including kinesthetics, body participation, and other exploratory techniques of perception." Although the architects and dancers did not work together for the full four weeks, they had enough common meetings and confronted enough common problems to gain a sophisticated knowledge of (for the architects) how the freeing of the body and its movements can lead to heightened spatial awareness, and (for the dancers) how activities and objects other than their own movements and bodies can take place in an environment. The sciences and arts of architecture, ecology, music, cinematography, graphics, choreography, and lighting were all invoked and utilized to intensify the sense of environmental awareness that was the aim of the workshop. Besides the Halprins, other "instructors" participating included architect and educator Charles Moore, geographer Richard Reynolds, lighting specialist Patrick Hickey, cinematographer Joe Erath, graphic designer Barbara Stauffacher, composer Morton Subotnick, and dancer Norma Leistiko and other members of the

Ann Halprin Workshop staff. There were also frequent social gatherings.

Find the Right Process

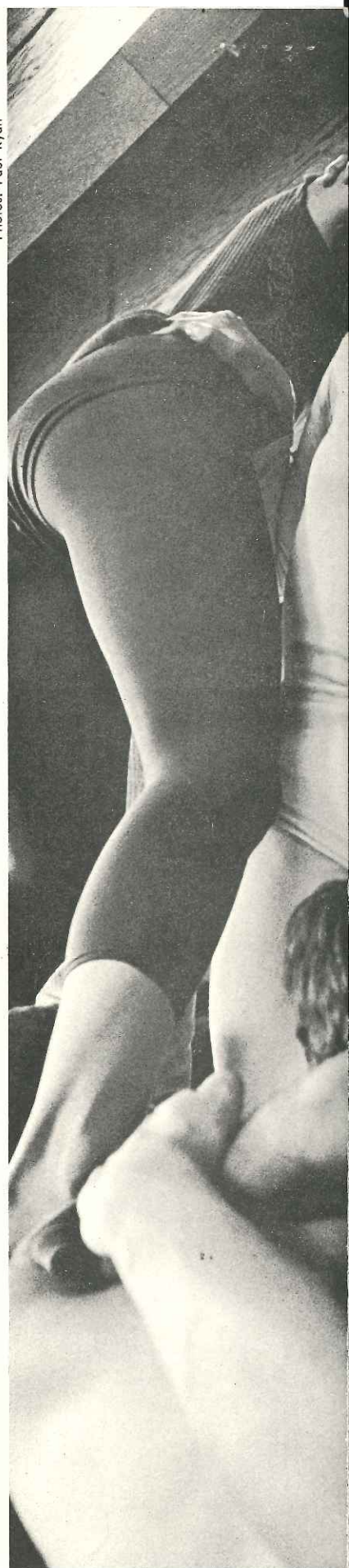
Halprin believes that the whole struggle in the creation of meaningful urban design is to find the right process of bringing together all the seemingly disparate elements and experiences that make up an urban composition. The idea of imposing a preconceived form on the city is nonsense, he believes. "Chandigarh and Brasilia were the last gasp of that, I hope, and you see what bad cities they are," he says. The summer workshop represented an attempt to find out about the search for this process through experiencing and recreating various environments and their elements. There was much emphasis on movement as a generator of form, on the isolation of the parts of the process of experience (sight, movement, hearing, touch, smell, etc.), and on the intuitive reaction to design and planning problems. At one session during the workshop, Halprin gave the architects the formal problem of replanning the Sea Ranch (MAY 1966 P/A). This was the worst session in the whole four weeks, he points out, because it was the only time the group had to work toward a "product," and to fulfill an anticipated result. The architects, who had been loosening up and learning to react directly to their surroundings, tightened up and became "students" again when confronted with this classroom problem. In any future series, Halprin will simply line out the parameters of the experiment and let the group go without stern boundaries and without trying to forecast the outcome of the event.

"Hard to Make Contact"

In the first week of the workshop, the group was exposed to the various elements it would be working with in the experiments: ecology of city and country, Halprin's system of motation (pp. 126-133, JULY 1965 P/A), dance and movement, light, and field trips in urban and rural areas.

Halprin's notes about the first dance session of the architects state: "Apparently very hard for them to make this close a physical contact. None of the guys will allow themselves to be really led. They are using every device to avoid plain contact—wiggling, jumping, etc." But Ann Halprin and Norma Leistiko,

Photos: Paul Ryan



**"The architects
the difference**



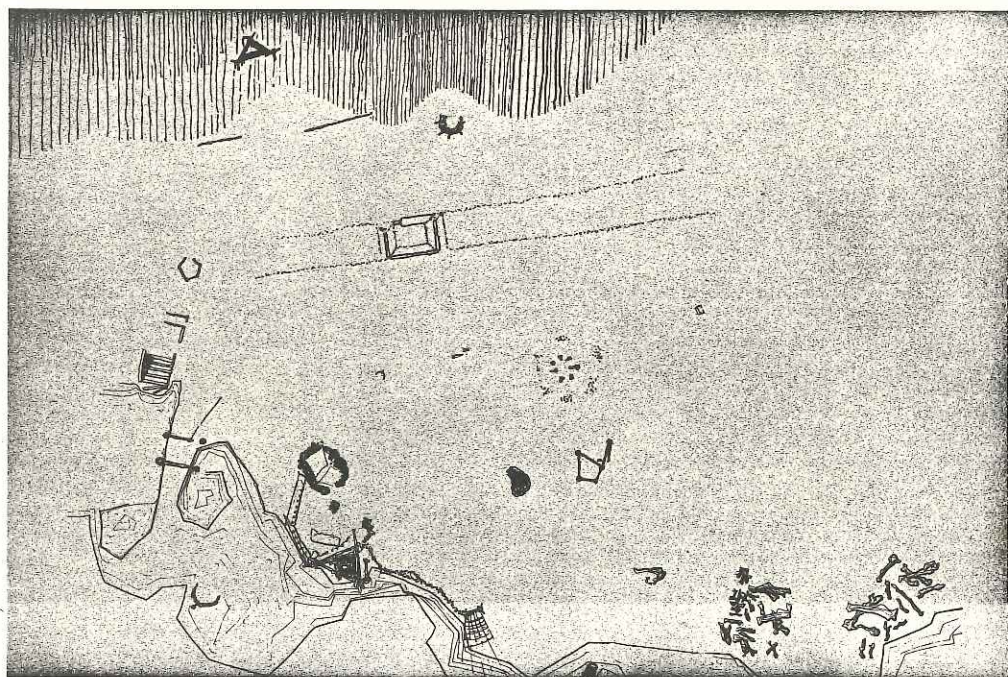
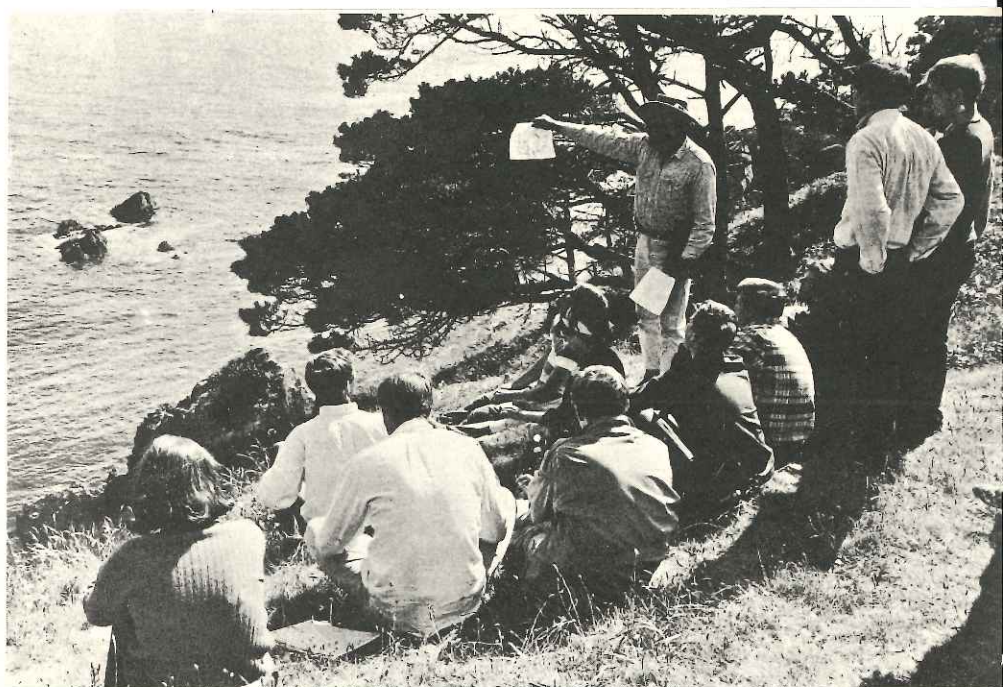
loosened up and soon you couldn't tell between them and the dancers."

using skeletal charts to explain the body structure and movement exercises to show how the body can become free, got the architects to shed their self-consciousness. "After the first awkwardness," Halprin says, "the architects loosened up and soon you couldn't tell the difference between them and the dancers." Later in the workshop, a young architect, asked to invent movements and direct his colleagues in a "choreographic" sequence, shouted, "Gosh, it feels like I'm God!" Ann Halprin, in *Dance Magazine*, reported that the architects "used their own bodies as human cantilevers to build groups which choreographers might hesitate to create, but which, thanks to their knowledge of architecture transferred to dance, were anatomically safe and sound."

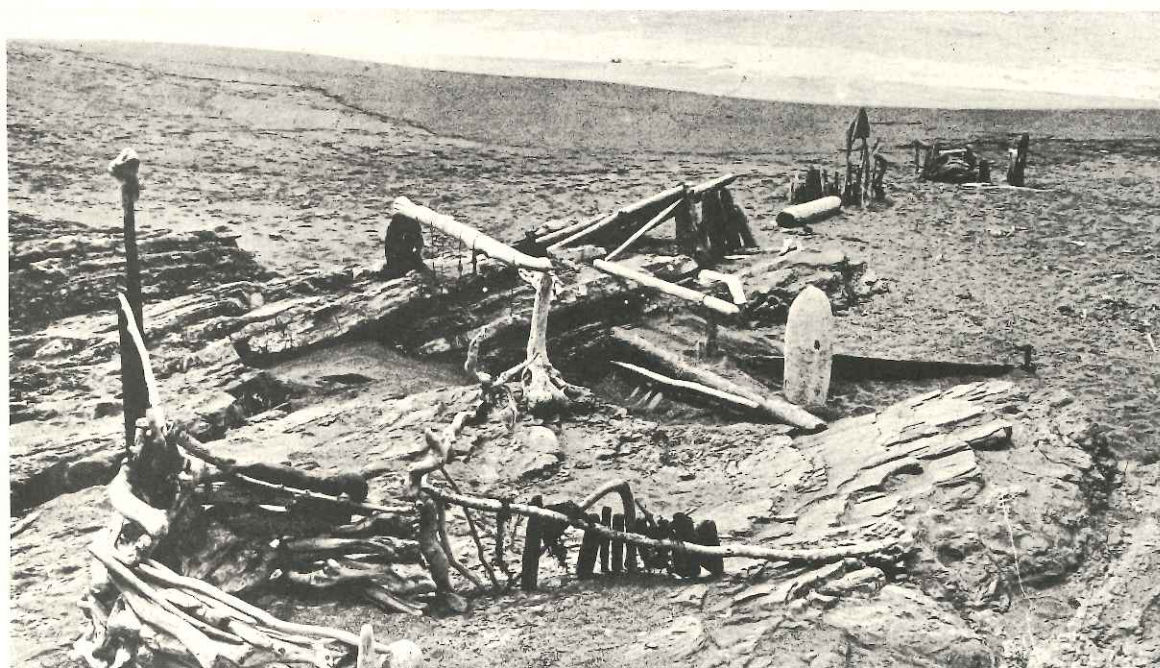
Close Your Eyes to Open Them

The process of heightening the senses of the workshop participants took place in the streets of San Francisco, in the groves and on the slopes of Mount Tamalpais, and on the shores and cliffs of Sea Ranch. After an initial walk round the area around Halprin's office below Russian Hill, teams of three were formed in which two would lead the third member blindfolded and he would call out sounds and sensations received during the walk. The city has a "background" noise of traffic rumble penetrated by different sounds such as horns, voices, close-by cars and trucks, etc. In the country, the sense perception walk was preceded by, and concurrent with, a rule of silence, so that no accustomed means of communication could interfere with sensory concentration. Sounds, smells, textures, colors, shapes become sharpened and more meaningful. Looks or touches shared with members of the group became charged with more than usual significance. "We understood the reasons . . . the *why* for us," said a girl dancer.

Halprin says that the group discovered that different kinds of areas (woods, fields, shore) gave different kinds of motion, and that some gave different kinds of sensory experiences. His own notes show a sketch of shoreline trees with the comment: "Strange combination. Strong straight pines, black, with high, piercing hum." This series of experiences, intensifying the senses by expanding and contracting them, was thought of great value



"A real 'city'—one with a gate, a main plaza, a temple, a tower, a stage structure in the water, and houses."



in the subsequent experiments with urban form and composition.

The Events

Concurrently with the examinations of movement, sensory happenings, and investigations of ecology and motation, a series of events took place in which the dancers and architects, separately or in combination, created atmospheres and occasions. One was based around light, an existing scaffold structure, and great lengths of wrapping paper. As dancers "told stories" through movement, architects gradually created an environment using lighting and the long strips of paper. Ann Halprin called it a beautiful thing, "fantastic and dreamlike." In an event at Halprin's hillside house, the group experimented with gravity as the motivating force. Lights plummeting down to the dance deck on wires, bodies swinging through the air and hung on great nets, drums of water released over the nude bodies of girls being pulled up a plastic-covered slope on ropes all created what Halprin calls a "fantastically beautiful event."

For fun, one evening, the participants went to the Fillmore Auditorium, one of the current hippie shrines for music and dancing in San Francisco. They got up in the balcony, painted each other all over in wild designs, and slid down ropes into the gyrating crowd below. Unfortunately, photographer Paul Ryan was so carried away with the scene that he joined them, leaving no pictorial record of the show.

Driftwood City

One of the most notable experiments in creating an urban scene came about when Halprin and Moore indicated a stretch of beach near Sea Ranch and told architects and dancers to erect their own structures there from the driftwood, stones, sand, earth, seaweed, and flotsam on the site. The only instructions were the center and bounds of the site and that there was to be no communication between workers. All were amazed when, after a day's work, it developed that the group had somehow wound up with a real "city"—one with a gate, a main plaza, a temple, a tower, a stage structure in the water, and houses. While each structure reflected the aims and personalities of those who worked on it (a couple in love did a little house just large enough to contain both of them, a retir-

ing young architect did a private cave dwelling and a more extroverted one did a tower on the hill, and a team of dancers did a performance platform at the water's edge), the whole composition could be read as a community. The next day, each of the group drew in his contribution on a large, over-all drawing, which, though this was done free-hand, later proved correct within a foot on actual measure of the site. This project was done halfway through the four-week workshop, and Halprin says that the dancers were freer, the architects still being too much worried about how things looked and intellectualizing their structures too much. One of the architects, in a discussion after building Driftwood Village, called it "action architecture through movement, not from cubism."

Union Square

One day, the whole group spent the daylight hours in Union Square at the heart of downtown San Francisco. They did not speak to one another, but listened, looked, took notes, became aware of all the activities of this extremely urban space at various times of day. Each participant wrote a letter to another member of the group during this silent time and mailed it afterward. At the stroke of three, the forty-odd participants rose from wherever they were in the square, converged on its center, and either released balloons or gave them away. Just the moving of that number of people in one direction acted as a magnet to everyone else in the square at that time, and they all followed, too. The notes of one of the group read, in part, when listening, "Old men picking up garbage can tops to look inside; sounds of conversations; crackling newspaper; cable car clanging; beep-beep of automobiles; hum of traffic; sparrows chirping; footfalls of leather soles though mostly quiet; generator working in the street; automobile; motorcycle; click of high heels; laughter and chatter of young Chinese boys; whistle for a dog"—then, when observing—"So many people wearing glasses; old men in straw fedoras meandering; middle-aged ladies in tight girdles hard to walk; upper-middle-class tourists, the men in blue jackets and cameras and the ladies walking ahead in white summer suits pointing; a beautiful Japanese girl in such high heels she can hardly stand on them; the man on the bench next door has not stopped talking

to his lady since they came half an hour ago—mostly business; a young girl with long brown hair reading a copy of the *Chronicle*; a young Filipino-appearing sailor walking diagonally across the square with his mother and sister; three young Negro boys across the square cackling loudly; the young girl threw her paper into the garbage can but let the top down carefully so that it did not bang."

The next day, much of the group did a replan of the square all on one great



sheet of paper, in silence. Another group also did a replan, but not in silence. This proved to be the least successful of the two, and Halprin reports that members of the second group were disappointed that they had not chosen to be in the silent plan group. Both groups, however, found out more about what a place like Union Square does in a city, and what people do in a place like Union Square.

Market Street

The final major experiment of the workshop was centered around Market Street, the wide thoroughfare that slices diagonally through downtown San Francisco, separating the main business district from the more run-down area south of Market. The street changes character from an upper-class business precinct near Montgomery Street and the Palace Hotel, to a procession of nudie movies,

bars, liquor stores, and pornography dispensaries further west, to a reviving area out close to the Civic Center. The architects lived on this street for a week, observing and experiencing it at all hours of the day and night. They looked at it as though they had never seen a city street before — Woolworth's became a museum instead of a store, for example. They had experiences the architect does not usually encounter: being accosted by homosexuals, set upon by hoods, getting into trouble with the police for suspicious behavior ("hanging around and looking like that"). Using every sense capability they had been sharpening for three weeks, they looked at the city, they smelled it, they felt it, they photographed it, drew it, took notes on it, recorded its sounds, ate in it, drank in it, got wet in it, dried out in it, had good, bad, amusing, exciting, and alarming adventures.

After this no doubt indelible experience, the architects gathered together their filmed and taped and drawn impressions of Market Street by day and night and recreated the whole thing in a multimedia, multiscreen presentation in the basement of Halprin's studio on Montgomery Street. Ann Halprin called the recreation an "absolutely choreographic" experience, even though it had no dance per se, and had all been created by architects. People who saw it have said it was one of the most powerful impressions of urban happenings they have ever seen. Halprin himself says, "There isn't anything they don't know about cities by now as a result of this — though it wasn't consciously planned that way."

A Year Later

It has now been a year since "Experiments in Environment" took place. That the experience has not dulled with the passage of time is shown by P/A's contact with many of the designers who took part in the workshop. "I will never again have any trouble finding approaches to a design, and I am sure that I'll never have a dull moment in my life because I am left so hungry to explore so many things," says architect Rob Randall Eifler. Landscape architect Wayne Bannister writes, "We learned there is a functional part of design but that the solution to functional problems can also be creative. In school, you are allowed a certain amount of freedom, but still there is a



"Become aware of all the activities of this extremely urban space."

grade. In an office, it is economics or someone who has more authority. In the workshop, there were no grades or criticism, but a direction."

Particular experiences stick in the minds of participants. Nick Peckham remembers during the Market Street experiment a lesson in how to deal with people: let them talk; don't lead them. He and Robert Holden, camera in hand and concealed tape recorder at the ready, came across the Gypsy Jokers, a Hell's Angels-type motorcycle crowd, lounging around on their own turf. Taking Peckham and Holden for plainclothesmen garnering evidence for the fuzz, the Jokers were at first hostile. By just letting them talk, the architects let them decide they were newspapermen, and the Jokers soon were posing and cavorting for the camera in great ebullience.

Holden feels that the workshop experience taught him that one's first responsibility is to one's own senses. Through the full utilization of these, one can create spaces that will evoke the reactions of others. Ideally, he thinks, a designer should create a space where peo-

ple can respond to their own stimuli rather than those imposed by the designer, but this is admittedly very difficult of achievement.

Peckham noted he had taken structure at Berkeley and at Penn, but had not really realized what it was about until actually exposed to the direct sensory openness of "experiencing something like a tree." He thinks that designers must "get away from materials and finishes and those things you're concerned with in New York."

Elpidio Rocha, who later helped stage the environmental experiment described on p. 174, commented: "There was nothing of a practical nature that could be applied to an architectural office, nothing that would make more money. Instead, there was a personal experience that will have practical implications in what I do, what I think about design, and what I will teach. I expect to have some of my students do something like this, with alterations that will suit their media — painting, for example. Perhaps if I were a painter, I would not have needed just this experience."

"The reason I applied to the workshop," writes Peter Van Dine, "was to have a chance to be exposed to an entirely new approach—for me—to architecture. Christopher Alexander, McLuhan, Michael Harrington, E.T. Hall and others have been a strong influence on my thinking toward both a social response and a rational approach to architecture. Working with Halprin was a great experience in that it added a totally new dimension of art (painting, sculpture, and music), motion, and response. It put the human as an individual back in the spaces of architecture. I came away with a new tool and a new outlook, and new stimuli that have been an influence on my attitudes and responses to design since."

"As an architect, my imagination was freed from thinking in terms of static pictures and I was encouraged instead to invent in terms of motion and ever-changing stimulations to all the senses, especially emotional sensitivity and the kinetic sense," says Eifler. "By releasing my mind from concentrating on the design of material objects, I developed an objective, tangible way of designing events, experiences, and activities at almost any scale or degree of interlacing, in order to satisfy not only groups of human desires at a particular point in time, but the range of human needs including, for example, the need for desires to change and new ones to be satis-

fied in order for people to continue stimulating themselves."

Merrill Pasco says that, "Of common significance seems the extent to which we all were enticed or goaded into extensions of our individual postures and attitudes toward design processes. The context in which this was effected—a fusillade of three-hour involvement-games within a rich spectrum of sensory media—was remarkably successful, but mere contact among each other and with the dancers, in this deluge of exposure, rates a close second. In mosaic, the effect upon myself appears as a trenchant clarification of the rudimentary role of sensory perceptions with respect to both subjective and objective approaches to design."

"At the first meeting of our workshop," Allen W. Johnson recalls, "Halprin told us he would not lecture to us but let us set our own pace. He would assign us a general line of action and let our personality come through—this was like music choreography—in which a person is given a block of time in which to improvise within the total number. He held to his promise, but one statement near the end of the workshop (during a movement through Market Street) was as good as a theme for the entire session. He said, 'Circulation and movement are the most important things you will ever do.' . . . We became aware of a world that is truly in motion—every molecule.

We learned the difference between the viewpoint of the person involved (moving through the environment) and that of the person watching from a distance (the designer)."

Few of the participants would change the set-up of Experiments in Environment if they had the chance. Eifler suggests "only that a second workshop again be an entirely new first-time adventure for both the Halprins and the students." "The only addition or change I could offer," says Bannister, "is that part of the course could be devoted to the social problems we face in the environment. The class was restricted to physical environment but the same creative approach could be beneficial in solving problems in the social environment." Van Dine thinks that the only change should be that "it could be longer, with more people and disciplines to be exposed to." And Johnson gives a unique accolade in saying that "the only thing I would recommend is that they charge more money."

A dozen young designers emerged from the experiences in the West permanently changed people. This text and these pictures probably cannot hope to duplicate what they did and what they felt. But it was an irrevocable experience, one of which Johnson says "I suppose it is a bit like trying to explain the taste of the fine wine Larry was fond of treating us to." — JTB

