HOME & GARDEN

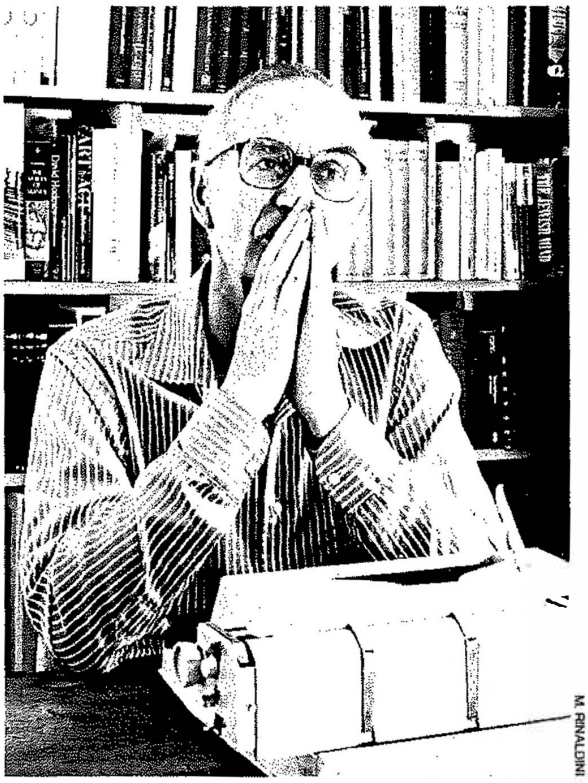
HABITS AND HABITATIONS

By Nicholas Fox Weber

The conditions of our psyches, I will suggest, reflect the interior of our rooms." So wrote Dr. James Hillman—professor, psychotherapist and former director of studies of the Jung Institute in Zurich—in one of his recent explorations of "the relations between our habits and our habitations." To read and to hear him is to consider the way in which the color and surface of the walls that surround us, the texture and density of the objects we use, affect our innermost emotions. Cheap chairs, or the sound of a pencil dropping on Formica, "fill us with minor anxieties"; soft cotton fabrics or wooden ceiling beams can, if we are sufficiently responsive, soothe us, bring on feelings of balance, and stir imagination.

The habitation that Hillman has most recently chosen for himself is an 1850s farmhouse in northeastern Connecticut. Having lived for almost 20 years in Switzerland and half a dozen in Dallas, he has now settled in the village of Thompson, where the row of rather grand colonial and Federal dwellings and public buildings along Main Street provide his spirit the benefits of a nearly ideal environment. While so many contemporary settings observed by Hillman antagonize and frustrate their inhabitants, this New England town inspires energy and optimism, qualities eagerly sought as the byproducts of the psychotherapeutic process that Hillman practices, and that he has come to attribute more and more to external as well as internal factors.

In a location that is central for patients from Massachusetts, New York, Vermont and elsewhere, this eminent doctor and intellectual innovator enjoys the satisfactions of his large vegetable garden and of healthy bonds with his own horses, goats and chickens. It's a way of life consistent with his philosophical outlook. He is near enough to airports to get to conferences at which he is asked to speak all over this country and Europe, and at the same time at the edge of woods in which he enjoys the psychological benefits he advocates from horseback riding and the rich diversity of New England's seasons.



M. RINALDINI

Dr. Hillman enjoying the ideal environment.

According to Dr. James Hillman of Thompson—an eminent psychotherapist and intellectual innovator—we are the spaces we inhabit.

At a lecture first presented to the American Academy of Psychoanalysis in 1980 and revised at various universities before being given at the Palazzo Vecchio (where he was awarded the Medal of the Commune of Florence), Hillman stressed that psychoanalysis has become too focused on the internal, subjective elements of patients' lives, with too little awareness of their external worlds. He called for a far closer scrutiny of the role of surroundings. "A decaying marriage can be analyzed to its intra- and inter-subjective roots, but until we have considered the materials and design of the rooms in which the marriage is set, the language in which it is spoken, the clothing in which it is presented, the food and money that are shared, the drugs and cosmetics used, the sounds and smells and tastes that daily enter the heart of that marriage—until psychology admits the world into the sphere of psychic reality—there can be no amelioration."

Modern offices and domestic interiors concern him deeply. "The rejecting feeling of a blank white Sheetrock wall is very oppressive," he says. "That bare white wall increases subjectivism—you're thrown back on yourself." Plasterwork, on the other hand, does something very different. It isn't just that our eye perceives the difference between plaster and wallboard, or that we can hear the difference in the way voices or vibrations sound in the room. Hillman speaks of the souls of the materials, of what emanates from them and how their presences can be felt. He contrasts the interior of a 19th-century peasant's hut—its rough, uneven plaster surface stained with lamp-black and covered

with a bas relief of pots and pans—to the flat, stark white expanses in many contemporary dwellings. He maintains that the character and life force of the plaster itself gave those 19th-century inhabitants a serenity and health of which modern man is too often deprived.

For Hillman himself, the diverse rooms and sloping floors of that farmhouse in Thompson offer much of what he has come to revere in his professional research. In his study, he uses a sideboard made from stair treads bought locally, while his desk is a wooden table, originally used for making gloves, that he brought from Switzerland. A heavy piece of local walnut spans two file cabinets to provide a second work surface. These objects "have display"—an imperative if things are to have soul, according to Hillman. Full of character and history (natural as well as worldly), they will also age well. And their user's response to their attributes is infectious.

Reading essays by James Hillman on subjects ranging from ceilings to lighting fixtures to automobile interiors can make one sharply aware not just of the appearance and function of every kitchen utensil or piece of furniture, but of the state of mind it can inspire. When I recently went to visit him—in that spacious, homey, distinctly undesigned farmhouse in spectacularly untouched Thompson—I found myself babbling as one often does in a social encounter with a psychiatrist, but rather than discussing childhood or dreams, I was carrying on about desks and desk chairs.

I explained that in my office in a New Haven suburb, I sit on a vinyl-covered stenographer's chair at a table made of two parallel pieces of Masonite, with a 4-inch opening between them, supported by slightly wobbly stove pipes. I have never felt great ease sitting there, but I always attributed my slight discomfort and sense of apprehension to the stresses of a demanding workday. A few years ago, I had an almost identical desk built in my study in my rural 18th-century house 15 minutes from the office, only in this instance it was a beautiful expanse of solid, well-oiled cherrywood with good, thick pine underneath, supported by slender but stable wooden legs. The chair I bought to go with it was similar to the one in the office, only better constructed and covered in pigskin. Hillman was intrigued with this idea of the same designs in different materials. I told him I always felt wonderful in my study, but, previous to reading his essays, I had always considered my feeling of well-being attributable to the proximity of my family and the mood of being at home as opposed to being at work. Now I thought that possibly the textures touching my body, the slight variations in the angles at which I sat, and the sense of firmness and

support were making the pivotal difference in my psychological state.

Hillman contrasted the way that composites like Masonite and vinyl have almost guaranteed obsolescence, while wood and leather will weather and age well if properly treated. He also stressed the variance not just in the touch but in the resonance of the substances. "And I don't believe that the difference in materials and craftsmanship is an issue of *luxuria*," he said. "We Americans always have to deal with a tradition of Puritan Protestantism, that old thing of 'make it do, wear it out.' I think that *quality* and *luxuria* shouldn't be confused; in fact, the original Puritans always did believe in good material and fine workmanship. If you look at your pigskin chair in terms of luxury or in terms of quality, it makes a big difference. Someone can say, 'Oh, you like your pigskin chair because it's top of the line and shows you've arrived'—then it's *luxuria*. But you can also look at it through the eyes of *quality*, that it is the right material for a chair...it breathes, it feels good."

He adds that it isn't just having the right materials that matters. Plenty of people live surrounded by details of the highest quality without achieving nirvana. The inhabitants of splendid settings in which armchairs cushion the body perfectly, light is subtle and diffused, and doorknobs are smooth and well-formed for the palms of our hands—all of which should encourage warm feelings of intimacy and vitality—"can still be in crazy neurosis," says Hillman. "It isn't only the things, but the noticing, the relationship to one's objects and environment. That's one of the functions of the soul—*notitia*—paying attention. That's what Matisse and Vuillard did." They didn't care about the status of objects, but responded more personally to their true character.

The degree to which he notices and the acuity of his observations are what have made James Hillman such a seminal figure in the field of "depth psychology," and make his thinking of great potential value to architects and interior designers. In essays that have appeared in publications like the newsletter of The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture (of which he was a founder), in *Spring/An Annual of Archetypal Psychology and Jungian Thought* (of which he and his wife are editor and publisher), and in a book called *Inter Views* (Harper & Row, 1983), he has touched on the effects of ceiling design, lighting fixtures, office layout, garden plans and pedestrian thoroughfares in urban spaces.

He writes about the vast consequences of what is above and in front of us on what is inside us. "No matter how tall the building or magnificent its skin and front plaza, inside that soaring feeling is reduced to

HABITATIONS

individual rooms, corridors, compartments, cubbyholes with an 8-foot ceiling," he says in "Interiors in the Design of the City: The Ceiling," published in 1983 in the Dallas Institute newsletter. "You step out of the elevator on the 48th floor into a corridor whose ceiling you can almost touch with your fingertips; we are still in the same tunnel like the underground garage. Now what *does* meet the eye looking up? What's up there is the ceiling as service center, a covering for wires, cables, tubes, ducts, immediately accessible for maintenance. Here is one more instance of interior, designed not for the 9-to-5 inhabitants of that interior but for the maintenance crew, not for the pleasure of use but for the occasions of breakdown. It is like choosing your clothes in the morning to wear for an accident. If looking up is that gesture of aspiration and orientation toward the higher order of the cosmos, an imagination opening toward the stars, our ceilings reflect an utterly secular vision—shortsighted, utilitarian, unaesthetic." When ceilings were "enhanced by carving the beams, painting, gilding, stucco, plaster, looking up fed the imagination."

Modern man is oppressed by overhead lighting as well as ceiling design, according to Hillman. "You do not want to raise your eyes, to look into fluorescent fixtures, at the bright bulb in the track can. You keep your head down—a depressive posture. In such light, what does the soul do with its shadows, where find interiority? Does the soul not shrink into even deeper personal interiors, into more darkness, so that we feel cut off, alienated, prey to the darkest of the dark: guilts, private sins, fears, and horror fantasies? I am suggesting that many of our social evils and psychological troubles—and even economic ills, such as low productivity, inefficiency, absenteeism, sexual harassment, job turnover, quality decline, on-the-job addiction (whether Valium, alcohol, coffee or soda pop)—are psychological results of interior design. I am saying that until we recognize the effect of the design of interiors on our interiority, we shall be living in a kind of Orwellian repression. If our society suffers from failures of imagination, of leadership, of cohesive farsighted perspectives, then we must attend to the places and moments where these interior faculties of the human mind begin."

Hillman is now at work on a piece about "*putzfrau* architecture" and the current obsession with low-maintenance living. "No maintenance means *non maintenir*," he says, "no holding in the hands, as little hand in it as possible." He points out that the abiding concern in hospital and airport design is the cost of cleaning and keeping the buildings up. We often rule out combinations of materials like wood and slate and grass, and avoid mold-

HABITATIONS

ings and other such complications and variations—all because flat synthetic expanses are easier to clean. Thus we deprive ourselves of essential sensory experiences, he says.

In the field of urban design, Hillman is particularly concerned with the increasing dependence on automobile travel. Cars remove people from group situations, he says, promoting an isolation in which personal expression ceases to matter. Small New England towns like Thompson offer a desirable alternative. In cities like Dallas and Los Angeles, where we do little walking, Hillman believes we subjugate our instincts to be on our feet and move forward. Not only do we drive to the office, but, once inside, we are forced by locked staircases to take the elevator even if we are only going from the 14th to the 15th floor. This lack of walking deprives us both of physical benefits and a sense of potency and freedom. Hillman points out the way in which we try to compensate for the loss; coincidental with this suppression of an aspect of our innate animality, there has been an increase of animal imagery in our external accoutrements—cars named cougars and rabbits, sports teams named tigers and lions.

The disregard for walking disturbs him in the field of garden and land spaces. Hillman feels that 18th-century garden

designers "were moved by aesthetic considerations," while contemporary ones are inspired more "by economic ones. What they left behind became national treasures for the community; what ours are leaving behind result in personal wealth for individuals." We need interesting alleyways, variations and diversion on the ground level, he believes, not just emphasis on the skyline. Sidewalks should be more than functional. They should meander organically, offering surprises, imitating the processes of nature. Potted trees, and plastics made to resemble woodgrain or stone, are no substitute for the feeling of nature's true randomness and beauty—a beauty we require "if we are to reclaim our souls." In the 18th century, there was "awareness of the distinction between how the eyes moved and how the feet moved, different courses. Today the foot is forced to travel over what the eye has done before, so the walking becomes a pain."

Hillman would like to see individuals even in giant office buildings have more control over their own spaces—the climatic factors as well as the aesthetics. Everyone should pay more attention to his furniture, tableware, lamps or whatever, for, he says, "the tawdry cheapness of some materials can fill a room" and permeate one's being.

Sometimes Hillman's thinking takes on a highly spiritual cast. "Things should be imagined as having soul. If they're treated miserably, they begin to rebel, and you feel miserable in their company." He approaches all such ideas with the curative goals of his profession. "One of the difficulties is taste," he says. "We don't have education of our tastes, and we are often ashamed of them. This is an area neglected in psychotherapy."

Our surroundings help dictate myriad feelings about ourselves. We need only consider the way we stand and breathe in Connecticut's finest white wooden Congregational churches, the animation and sense of adventure with which we walk down old Stonington streets, the suffusion of richness we experience in lushly carpeted, mahogany-paneled fitting rooms of our finest old shops as opposed to our edginess and irritability when they are all vinyl and Formica, and even the tranquility and security we feel inside a pup tent pitched over a bed of soft pine needles. How true it is that some settings drive us to caffeine or alcohol while others leave us wanting nothing. Some of us know the places and things that stabilize and enliven us; others are still seeking them. "Change of soul," James Hillman says, "can take place inside our ordinary rooms." □

Nicholas Weber is the director of the Josef Albers Foundation and the author of Leland Bell *(Hudson Hills Press, 1986).*