

In local authorities, for example, both the politicians and administrators may attempt to establish themselves as the communication channel between the designers and the users outside in order to force through policy or maintain a powerful position in the system. On balance such organisational barriers, whatever advantages they give to the client body in terms of increased control over the designer, serve only to make the designer's task of understanding the problem more difficult. Even if there are not barriers there are what Zeisel (1984) has called 'gaps'. He referred to 'paying clients' and 'user clients'. He showed that while there might often be good communications between designers and paying clients, both have a gap in their communications with user clients (Fig. 6.1). In a more recent piece of empirical work Cairns (1996) not only demonstrated the existence of these gaps in architectural design, but also that neither architects nor their clients were always aware of these gaps.

As many young designers must have found on leaving design schools, it is one thing to design for yourself but quite another to design for a real client with personal and institutional prejudices and biases. When that client is not even the prospective user of the design, the problem becomes even more remote. This increasing remoteness of designers from those for whom they design has created the need for user requirement studies. Almost in desperation designers have turned to social and human scientists from ergonomists through architectural psychologists to urban sociologists to tell them what their users actually need. By and large this liaison between design and social science has not been as practically useful as was first hoped. Social science remains largely descriptive while design is necessarily prescriptive, so the psychologists and sociologists have gone on researching and the designers designing, and they are yet to re-educate each other into more genuinely collaborative roles. Meanwhile the communication

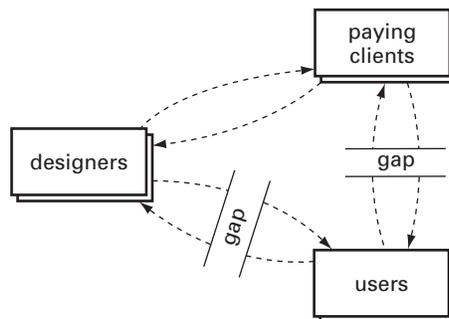


Figure 6.1
Zeisel's user-needs gap model

between the creators and users of environments often remains uncomfortably remote.

So users are generally more remote from designers than clients. Whilst the designer may be able to interact with a sympathetic and motivated client, there may be no formal access to users at all.

Designers

It is sometimes difficult to separate design from art. The products of design are frequently seen by the public as artistic, even sometimes actually as 'works of art', and designers themselves are indeed also often artists. Even the drawings generated by designers to illustrate their schemes can sometimes easily be confused with works of art. Whether or not an object can rightly be described as a 'work of art' is a matter which lies beyond the scope of this book. What is of importance here is not the product but the process. The creative process which may give rise to a work of art undoubtedly shares much in common with the design process, and many of the same talents may be needed for both. Designers, like artists, are expected not just to solve problems but to bring their issues and concerns into the process too. In this sense, however, the designer is usually rather more constrained than the artist. The artist may respond to the work in progress and is free to shift attention and explore new problems and territory. Such artistic issues are rarely clearly articulated by the artist beyond the work. It is usually critics and historians who retrospectively interpret and identify the issues which appear to them to have been uppermost in the artist's mind. When asked by a music critic to explain one of his operas, Wagner is reported to have responded rather testily 'but it is the explanation'.

The designer is usually expected to contribute problems too. In this sense designers are assumed by their clients to be artistic and their role to be at least partly interpretative. An architect's client expects rather more than just a house with rooms of appropriate sizes and relationships. The clear expectation is that an architect will consider issues of, for example, form, space and light, and through this create not just a building but what we call architecture. This client-designer relationship works both ways, for while the designer expects to be given some freedom in the definition of the design problem. It is also quite likely that