# The Hidden Dimension Study Guide

## The Hidden Dimension by Edward T. Hall

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# Plot Summary

All species in the animal kingdom have basic underlying organizational systems which allow them to survive and reproduce their own. One such system is the use of space. Man can be studied relative to the use of space around himself, in relationships with other humans, and in the cities, homes, and offices he constructs. The Hidden Dimension is such a study, providing a detailed evolutionary progression of the use of space, as well as the particular difficulties man, and specifically Americans, have wrought by the lack of understanding of what space means to all cultural groups on the planet.

Proxemics is a word coined by Hall combining the terms "proximity" and "phonemics," to mean a study of man's use of space as a part of his culture. The thesis of the book is that each animal group has its own physiological, psychological, and sociological proxemic needs and values, and these can be traced to the earliest forms of life on Earth, marching through the evolutionary chain, and culminating with the widely diverse use of space which each human culture exhibits today. Man has many of the proxemic needs and values of lower life forms, but these have been modified with the complexities of human thought, experience, art, literature, and living/working space. Further, man has created a number of extensions of himself, all of which impact his use of space and his relationship to his environment.

Animals perceive their three-dimensional environments through the use of their senses. As animals became more complex, some senses became more refined, while others declined in importance. The use of senses plays a major role in the regulation of distances among members of the same species and, of course, between one species and another. Ethologists have long studied the behavior of animals in their natural environments with an eye toward the effect of changes in those environments. From them have come such concepts as territoriality and social hierarchy. Alterations in the environment of a species, such as crowding, produce radical behavioral changes, including heightened aggression, loss of hierarchical roles, reproductive failure, shock, and mass die offs, even though food and water supplies are ample. Space regulation, then, appears to be a key feature of animal communities.

Building upon the work of ethologists, Hall provides amazing insight into man's interaction with his spatial environment, and demonstrates that each cultural group has unique concepts of territoriality, crowding, distance, and space requirements. Failure to grasp this understanding and to provide for it in our planning and development of structures has created critical cultural clash, particularly in our urban environments. Further, as we march continually toward a more global society, and must interact with cultures whose spatial values are often very different, we encounter misunderstanding and conflict. We can all perceive the three-dimensional world in which we live. The hidden dimension which we must come to understand is culture.

# Characters

## Edward T. Hall

Edward Hall is probably the most prominent anthropologist of the twentieth century. Holding a doctorate in anthropology from Columbia University, Hall has been a university professor and researcher, as well as a consultant for local state and national governments. Hall's area of study has related to man's interrelationship with his environment and fellow species members, focusing primarily on how language and senses are used in these activities. He has written several non-fiction works based upon his own research, as well as that of many others. Because of his extensive knowledge of the differences among diverse cultures, having lived and worked in Europe, the Middle East and Asia, he has participated in the training of U.S. State Department Foreign Service Officers, prior to their placement in foreign countries. Further, some of his works are required reading for Peace Corps volunteers. His non-fiction works, in addition to The Hidden Dimension, include The Silent Language, Handbook for Proxemic Research, The Fourth Dimension in Architecture, The Dance of Life, Hidden Differences, and Beyond Culture. In all of his works, Hall uses observation and research to support the general concept that if man is to survive on the planet, he must develop an understanding of the vast inter-species differences and the ways in which each cultural group perceives its world and expresses itself to others. Further, man must use his planet wisely, particularly in the planning and development of his living and work space. Hall himself coined the term "proxemics," which generally means the observations and theories he developed about man's use of his space and the influence of culture on that use. His self-stated goal is to promote man's understanding that his specific culture is embedded deep within him, and that it produces unconscious perceptions of his world. Only when man becomes consciously aware of his cultural influences and those of other cultural groups will he be able to begin the process of developing ways by which his and other cultures can coexist peacefully. Hall is currently "retired" and living in New Mexico, although he is a frequent lecturer and consultant worldwide.

## James Gibson

Author of The Perception of the Visual World, James Gibson identified and classified sensory shifts and varieties of perspectives into four categories of perspective—position, parallax, independent of position or movement of observer, and depth at a contour. While these may initially be seen as relative only to the viewer of art, Gibson clearly expands this information to demonstrate that these perspectives relate directly to man's visual world and thus his spatial perceptions. Such perceptions provide the information all humans need in order to move about and engage in all life activities. Hall considers Gibson's system so important that he provides a comprehensive review of the system in the Appendix portion of his book. All human perception, according to Gibson, has a past, in that it depends upon memory or past stimulation. Anything now perceived

is based upon one's perceptual past—sensory information that has built up over one's lifetime. Now retired, Gibson was a professor of psychology at Cornell University. During his working years, he developed the concept of the differentiation between man's "visual field," that which is actually seen by the eye retina, and "visual world," that which man actually perceives, based upon his visual history. Thus, individuals from two different cultures or visual histories may have very different visual experiences when viewing the same thing. The simplest example of this phenomenon is the very different ways in which Americans and Japanese view artwork. Americans tend to see the objects as they are placed in space. The Japanese see the spaces in between objects in order to "see" the objects. Logical extensions of the cultural influence upon visual worlds result in very basic differences of what one group perceives to be crowded or not, to be confining or open, to be spatially well-organized or not. These perceptions can create major clashes among cultures unless there is mutual understanding of each other's visual worlds.

## John Christian

John Christian is an ethologist and medical pathologist who conducted histological research on the Sika deer of James Island. Through autopsies performed on deer who died after overcrowding, during die-off, and after subsequent population stabilization, he identified important internal physiological alterations which resulted in severe metabolic disturbances and shock. The return to normalcy of metabolism after population stabilization demonstrated that overcrowding of animals has disastrous physical consequences.

## John Calhoun

Ethologist John Calhoun conducted a 14-year research study on the effects of overcrowding on rat populations in captivity. Having deliberately overcrowded a series of pens of mice and providing ample food and water, Calhoun noted significant behavioral changes, including increased aggression, reproductive and child-rearing disruptions, and breakdown of social hierarchical structures. From his study came the term "behavioral sink," to describe the gross distortions of behavior he observed.

## Maruice Grosser

Painter of the twentieth century, primarily in the area of portraiture, Grosser published a book, The Painter's Eye, providing non-artists with an understanding of how painters and sculptors "see" their subjects and why they select specific distances from their subjects in order to create a piece that portrays the correct image to the viewer. The work provided insights into man's perception of distance as a function of social interaction.

# Franz Boas

Franz Boas was an early twentieth century anthropologist who studied native American languages and set forth the concept of the intimate relationship between language and culture. His major contribution to the field of anthropology was the concept that man's cultural experiences from birth form his language and, because he can only describe and react to his world in terms of language, his world is thus limited.

# Robert Sommer

A Canadian social-psychologist, Sommer studied the relationship between placement of semifixed-feature space, specifically furniture, and its impact on social interaction. He determined that individuals who sit in relatively close proximity and at 90-degree angles, have far more conversation than those who sit across from one another or side-by-side. Results of his study have been used by hospitals, nursing homes and other institutions in the placement of furniture, and certainly reinforced by observations of furniture placement of various cultural groups.

# Heini Hediger

Hediger was a Swiss ethologist who studied animal behavior relative to territoriality and uniform distances between animals of the same species and animals of different species. He classified distances as flight, critical, personal, and social. Hall draws upon Hediger's studies and their relationship to the distances which people of different cultures set in their interactions with others.

# Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Co-authors of the book, Beyond the Melting Pot, Glazer and Moynihan clearly demonstrate that there is actually no "melting pot" in American cities, because ethnic groups maintain their own identities for generations. Hall uses the conclusions of their work to propose the construction of cultural/ethnic enclaves within urban areas, for social order and proxemic comfort of all groups.

# Chester Hartman

A sociologist and author, Hartman observed and studied the effects of the renovation and renewal of the Boston West End neighborhood, an Italian enclave. He accurately described the variances between the space needs of Italians and the actual renovation that occurred. City developers failed to understand that Italians are content to be in crowded living conditions in their homes, because their living space extends beyond the structure to the streets, stores and churches. By eliminating the important extensions of

Italian living space, a depressing, stressful environment was created from a formerly stable neighborhood.

# Objects/Places

## James Island

Located in the Chesapeake Bay, James Island is a 280 acre land form onto which 5 deer were introduced in the early 1900's. The deer population grew to numbers that resulted in less than 1 acre per deer, a condition of overcrowding. Ethologist John Christian conducted a major study of the effects of overcrowding on animal populations, using the deer population of James Island. He concluded that negative physiological changes resulted in mass die-offs, even though food and water were plentiful for the entire population.

## Boston West End

An inner city neighborhood in Boston, the West End became the site of major renewal conducted by the city government. The effects of this renovation on the Italian population were wholly negative, because developers and planners failed to understand their basic cultural perceptions of space in this ethnic enclave.

## Delos Conferences

In Greece, there is an annual assembly of the world's most prominent experts on the dynamics of human settlements in villages, town and large cities. The purpose of the conference is to provide urban planners throughout the world with the important aspects of spatial perceptions held by each cultural group.

## Garden Ryoanji

Just outside of Kyoto, the Ryoanji Zen Monastery maintains a famous garden typifying Japanese perception of the space between objects to achieve aesthetic order, simplicity, and peacefulness.

## Rockville, Maryland

Ethologist John Calhoun settled in Rockville for 14 years, having constructed a stone barn to house pens for his study of the effects of overcrowding on rats.

## Saskatchewan, Canada

Saskatchewan is a province in Canada and site of a major study of semifixed-feature space in a health and research center. The study demonstrated that by moving furniture

into different configurations, the staff was able to promote much more conversation and social interaction among patients and residents.

## Champs-Elysees

The major and most famous thoroughfare in Paris, the Champs-Elysees is an enormously wide street with sidewalks so wide that they insulate Parisians from the noise, filth and exhaust of traffic.

## enclave

An enclave refers to a small sub-section of an urban area where a cultural group settles in order to maintain and support their cultural heritage and spatial perceptions.

## Marina City

Located in Chicago, Marina City was one of the earliest contemporary efforts to create a total living space, including apartments, shops, markets, a theater, and restaurants. The "city" consists of towers on the Chicago River, taking an entire city block.

## Altimira

There are three cave sites in this area of northern Spain, in which paleolithic cave artists painted objects of their visual world, as early as 16,000 B.C.

# Themes

## Culture Affects Man's Perceived Space Requirements

From the earliest caveman through contemporary man, human existence and activity has always involved man's perception of his place in space, his use of space, and his perception of spatial needs for comfort and security. The base of space experience initially comes from vision, hearing, smell, and touch, and when man is able to synthesize these experiences, he develops a perception of his spatial environment which is unique, because no two individuals perceive things in exactly the same way. These unique perceptions are then molded into commonality by the patterns of language and culture, so that groups of people develop common spatial needs and requirements. The diverse ways in which cultural groups perceive their space translate into a variety of structures and extensions of structures which can be easily observed and understood, with appropriate study and research. The differences of cultural perceptions of space, spatial arrangements, and spatial needs and requirements result in significant misunderstanding and conflict between cultures which lead to both verbal and violent clashes. Moreover, the greater the perceptual differences between two cultures, the greater the potential for conflict. This is the reason, for example, for the rather pervasive and continual conflict between the Arab and Western worlds. The challenge for contemporary man is to develop the awareness and understanding of space perceptions of his fellow species members, and to honor these in relationships, so that misunderstanding and conflict can be eased in a world that is quickly fusing into a global society.

## Man Creates His Own Environments

Man is now creating his own environment through his structures and his extensions of his sensing devices. His buildings, villages, towns and cities reflect his best attempt to organize his space and his spatial perceptions, often without regard to the cultural needs of the various groups which must inhabit them. Thus, groups must "become" what these spaces require, often with extremely negative consequences. Slums and prisons, for example, create cultures which have been so shaped by their environments that, even should they "escape" these environments, they have been so significantly altered that they can no longer easily be integrated into the environment of the dominant culture. In addition, man has created extensions to his sensing organs, to include radio, television, automobile, and computer, so that he can exclude himself from his natural physical environment and thus no longer interact with it. The potential negative consequences of this are far-reaching. If man no longer places importance on interaction with his natural physical environment, he loses regard for it. In losing regard for it, he becomes immune to the negative changes and destruction of that natural environment, and becomes an organism which is ego-centric, self-absorbed, and removed from his identity as a member of the human race and as an inhabitant of a planet which requires care and maintenance.

## Urban Planning Must Honor the City's Current Occupants

Throughout the world, people of very diverse cultures are now coming together to live and work. Nowhere is this more evident than in the United States, traditionally been termed the "melting pot" of all cultural groups. This "melting pot" does not really occurred, however, because, as ethnic and cultural groups arrive in American cities, they tend to congregate in enclaves, in which their specific spatial perceptions and needs can be somewhat honored. Since this explosion of city dwelling has progressed without careful planning, America's inner cities are now plagued with slums, crime, and psychological and physical illness, causing a "flight" to the suburbs of middle-class white Americans. In an effort to "clean up" their cities, local governments have engaged in wholesale urban renewal which, for the most part, has been a dismal failure. Because renovation and renewal has not included basic understanding of the spatial concepts and needs of cultural groups, city planners and developers have created structures which are not compatible for the groups who must inhabit them. Crowding, stacking, and destruction of culturally-based neighborhoods has only served to increase the ills of all large cities, and this cannot continue if American cities are to survive. In any renovations of urban areas, city officials, planners, and architects must include anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists in the design and development from beginning to end.

# Style

## Perspective

Hall's perspective is obviously that of a scientific observer and researcher. In order to lend credibility to his concepts, hypotheses, and predictions, he must demonstrate that he has engaged in an organized, sequential and thorough analysis and evaluation of the research and studies of ethologists, sociologists, psychologists, and fellow anthropologists. The synthesis of all of this research and study becomes as objective as possible, and he achieves this third-person perspective very well. It is impossible, however, to be thoroughly objective when one is pressing for acceptance of psychological, sociological and anthropological theories and recommendations for man's future well-being. As a result, significant personal comment and subjective perspectives are sprinkled throughout the text, as Hall describes the dangerous paths he believes man to be currently traveling and implores Americans to make basic changes in their interactions with their environment and fellow humans. The reader thus gains insights into the depth of Hall's commitment to man's future existence and his deep desire to see cultures develop the skills and understanding to peacefully co-exist on this planet. His overall perspective is both as an objective outside observer of the path of man, but, as well, as an intimate member of the species he is attempting to save. From a standpoint of literary analysis, the perspective encompasses first, second, and third-person viewpoints.

## Tone

Upon completion of this book, the reader will most assuredly be left with an overwhelming respect for the academic tone of the entire work. The wealth of research cited, as well as the personal observations and studies of Hall himself, constitute an intellectually sound piece which stimulates a significant amount of thought and discussion. Beyond the academic nature of the work, however, there is both pessimism and optimism, which leave an almost ambiguous impression upon the reader. There is humor, condemnation, optimism for the ability of man to solve basic interrelationship difficulties, and yet a pessimism about man's commitment to his species and his planet. The blend of these leave the reader both compelled to action but wondering where and how to begin. The "call to action" which is obvious in the last part of Hall's work, is deliberate and profound. Each member of the human race must make it a personal goal to re-establish his connection with his natural environment and with his fellow man. Further, he must press his political leaders at all levels to make basic changes in the ways in which they approach the diversity of American cultural groups within their own domains and in the ways they approach relationships with the political leaders of countries whose cultures are so profoundly different. In the midst of all of this, world leaders must somehow come together, "table" their differences and work toward the preservation of the planet. His overall tone, then, is varied, and is certainly reasonable and appropriate, given the nature of the work.

## Structure

As with any academic work of note, the structure of The Hidden Dimension is classical. Chapters and sections are organized and presented so that the reader is lead from very basic scientific study of animal behavior through the evolutionary chain to man, and then to man's complexities, as he attempts to reconcile all of the perceptual and cultural differences among his fellow species members. There is thus an organized, sequential progression that the reader may not fully see until the final chapters, when everything is synthesized to reveal the state of contemporary man and the challenges he faces in order to sustain himself. In this process, however, the reader is at times left wondering what the significance of some study or observation truly is, only to discover that it significantly relates to some later conclusion, prescription or concept. This structure may require more than one reading of sections or chapters, but the end result is certainly worth the effort.

# Quotes

"A review of the immediate receptors reveals first that Americans who live urban and suburban lives have less and less opportunity for active experiences of either their bodies or the spaces they occupy. Our urban spaces provide little excitement or visual variation and virtually no opportunity to build a kinesthetic repertoire of spatial experiences. It would appear that many people are kinesthetically deprived and even cramped. In addition, the automobile is carrying the process of alienation from both the body and the environment one step further," (p. 62).

"Both the Japanese and the European concept of spatial experience varies from our own, which is much more limited. In America, the conventional idea of the space needed by office employees is restricted to the actual space required to do the job. Anything beyond the minimum requirement is usually regarded as a "frill." The concept that there may be additional requirements is resisted, at least in part because of the American's mistrust of subjective feelings as a source of data. We can measure with a tape whether or not a man can reach something, but we must apply an entirely different set of standards to judge the validity of an individual's feeling of being cramped," (p. 52).

"The world's populations are crowding into cities, and builders and speculators are packing people into vertical filing boxes—both offices and dwellings. If one looks at human beings in the way that the early slave traders did, conceiving of their space requirements simply in terms of the limits of the body, one pays very little attention to the effects of crowding. If, however, one sees many surrounded by a series of invisible bubbles which have measurable dimensions, architecture can be seen in a new light. It is then possible to conceive that people can be cramped by the spaces in which they have to live and work. They may even find themselves forced into behavior, relationships, or emotional outlets that are overly stressful," (p. 129).

"...different use of the senses leads to very different needs regarding space no matter on what level one cares to consider it. Everything from an office to a town or city will reflect the sense modalities of its builders and occupants. In considering solutions to problems such as urban renewal and city sinks, it is essential to know how the populations involved perceive space and how they use their senses," (p. 148).

"Proxemic patterns play a role in man comparable to display behavior among lower life forms; that is, they simultaneously consolidate the group and isolate it from others by on the one hand reinforcing intragroup identity and on the other making intergroup communication more difficult. Even though many may be physiologically and genetically one species, the proxemic patterns of the Americans and the Japanese often strike one as being as disparate as the territorial display patterns of the American grouse and the Australian bower birds earlier described," (p. 149).

"Proxemic patterns differ. By examining them it is possible to reveal hidden cultural frames that determine the structure of a given people's perceptual world. Perceiving the world differently leads to differential definitions of what constitutes crowded living,

different interpersonal relations, and a different approach to both local and international politics. There are in addition wide discrepancies in the degree to which culture structures involvement, which means that planner should begin to think in terms of different kinds of cities, cities which are consistent with the proxemic patterns of the people who live in them," (p. 164).

"The implosion of the world population into cities everywhere is creating a series of destructive behavioral sinks more lethal than the hydrogen bomb. Man is faced with a chain reaction and practically no knowledge of the structure of the cultural atoms producing it. If what is known about animals when they are crowded or moved to an unfamiliar biotope is at all relevant ot mankind, we are now facing some terrible consequences in our urban sinks," (p. 165).

"To solve formidable urban problems, there is the need not only for the usual coterie of experts—city planners, architects, engineers of all types, economists, law enforcement specialists, traffic and transportation experts, educators, lawyers, social workers, and political scientists—but for a number of new experts. Psychologists, anthropologists, and ethologists are seldom, if ever, prominently featured as permanent members of city planning departments but they should be. Research budgets must not be whimsically turned on and off as has happened in the past. When good, workable plans are developed, planners must not be forced to witness a breakdown of implementation which is so often excused on the grounds of politics or expediency," (p. 169).

"In the course of planning our new cities and revamping our old ones, we might consider positively reinforcing man's continuing need to belong to a social group akin to the old neighborhood where he is known, has a place, and where people have a sense of responsibility for each other. Apart from the ethnic enclave, virtually everything about American cities today is sociofugal and drive men apart, alienating them from each other," (p. 174).

"As now constituted, the American city is extraordinarily wasteful, emptying itself each night and every weekend. One would think that efficiency-minded Americans could do better. The result of suburbanization of our cities is that the remaining residents are now predominantly the overcrowded impoverished and the very rich, with a sprinkling of holdouts from the middle class. As a result, the city is very unstable," (p. 176).

"Many ethologists have been reluctant to suggest that their findings apply to man, even though crowded, overstressed animals are known to suffer from circulatory disorders, heart attacks, and lowered resistance to disease. One of the chief differences between man and animals is that man has domesticated himself by developing his extensions and then proceeded to screen his senses so that he could get more people into a smaller space. Screening helps, but the ultimate buildup can still be lethal. The last instance of severe urban overcrowding over a significant period of times was in the Middle Ages, which were puntcuated by disastrous plagues," (p. 184).

"It isn't just that Americans must be willing to spend the money. Some deeper changes are called for which are difficult to define, such as a rekindling of the adventuresome

spirit and excitement of our frontier days. For we are confronted with urban and cultural frontiers today. The question is, How can we develop them? Our past history of anti-intellectualism is costing us dearly, for the wilderness we must now master is one requiring brains rather than brawn. We need both excitement and ideas and we will discover that both are more apt to be found in people than in things, in structure than content; in involvement rather than in detachment from life," (p. 187).

# Topics for Discussion

Writing in 1966, Edward Hall made some rather perilous predictions for American cities, as well as some prescriptions for the solution to the problems of overcrowding, crime and filth of large urban areas. To what extent have his predictions come true? Are there any current urban renewal projects that reflect an understanding of the proxemics he posited?

Hall devotes a large section of one chapter to the cultural differences between Americans and Arabs. To what extent do you feel these cultural differences are responsible for the rather violent and comprehensively negative relationships between the Arab world and America today?

Hall states, "Automobiles insulate man not only from the environment but from human contact as well. They permit only the most limited types of interaction, usually competitive, aggressive, and destructive. If people are to be brought together again, given a chance to get acquainted with each other and involved in nature, some fundamental solutions must be found to the problems posed by the automobile," (p. 177). What, in your opinion, would a "fundamental solution" look like?

Hall seems to recommend that cities be somehow divided into enclaves, in order to accommodate comfort and needs of diverse ethnic and cultural groups. What positive and negative impacts would such an organizational structure have?

There appears to be a recent American societal phenomenon to re-engage a relationship with nature. Certain sub-groups of our culture have become involved in outdoor activities, establishing more green space, eating only natural foods, and purporting to have an abiding interest in preserving the environment. Given that the majority of these sub-groups live outside the limits of urban centers, how can this new movement be transposed into urban environments?

Our technology is growing almost more rapidly than our ability to adjust to it. Hall predicted that increased technological advances would only serve to further isolate man from his natural environment, his own cultural counterparts and, worse, from other cultural groups. To what extent is this true, and in what ways can technology be used to promote greater understanding among cultural groups?

The book is replete with detailed descriptions and analysis of animal behavior, particularly that of other mammals. To what extent do you believe that the responses of these animals to changes in their environmental space can be used to explain the responses of man to changes in his spatial environment? Use specific examples in your response.