

of the broad building typology, but might be seen as a matter of style. In particular he argues that this aspect of space may be seen to reflect the social values and lifestyles of those controlling it. In an amusing study of retail environments he compares the American Co-op with the now ubiquitous supermarket (Sommer 1998). These shops are truly co-operative ventures with volunteer staff and are significantly different to their more institutionalized British counterparts. Sommer had already shown that those who choose to use such shops are identifiably different in lifestyle and social and ethnic background. In his study of the spatial organization of these shops he showed a much less clear demarcation between staff work areas and the public space than is found in normal supermarkets. However, he also observed how the layout seemed to encourage meeting and chatting between customers and staff. He showed how in the Co-op the aisles are narrower and are interrupted by bins containing unpacked bulk food. He noticed how customers having to bag their own purchases dally much longer in one place and may thus have much more contact with other shoppers. By comparison the supermarket aisles seem like 'motorways' for shopping trolleys, emphasizing speed and independence and thus enabling a 'grab and run' behavioural pattern. By contrast, then, Sommer has noticed how the Co-op enables and encourages a community spirit in which like-minded people share space in a more co-operative manner. This is a highly sophisticated and yet deep-seated example of the language of space in operation.

### **Non-reciprocal relationships**

We do not all always want a community spirit. Many people frequently find themselves co-existing in a space with others who they do not particularly wish to engage with socially. The most disturbing arrangement in such a situation is that which is non-reciprocal – that is to say, the two people do not have the same view of each other. There is nothing more disturbing than knowing that someone is looking in your direction and yet, because you are not facing them, you cannot tell if they are looking at you. One of Robert Sommer's students found that by using such a seating pattern in a library reading room she could drive away the earlier occupant of a table more quickly than by adopting the more normal 'co-existing' position. An example of this would be the familiar six-seater rectangular table with two seats on each side and one at each end. The first occupant of an empty table is quite likely to sit on one of the side seats, and then probably spreads books and papers out to defend the seat next to him. He would expect the next occupant to choose the seat diagonally opposite so that both can look into space and ignore each other in the classic 'co-existing' relationship. If, however, that second occupant sits at the other end of the table, as the experimenter did, then she has the unpleasant and socially unfair advantage of overlooking but not being overlooked (Fig. 6.8).