



6.8 A deliberate breaking of the ‘co-existing’ spatial convention that is likely to drive away the original occupant of the table sitting at ‘X’. The newcomer choosing to sit at ‘A’ obtains an unfair advantage of non-reciprocal vision, which often makes us feel uncomfortable

The importance of facing or not facing people has been studied in meetings and discussion group settings (Steinzor 1950). It was shown that when people are seated in a circular arrangement they tend to use non-verbal behaviour to indicate their interaction more with people sitting directly opposite to them than with other members of the groups, unless there is strong leadership in the form of chairing. Where this strong leadership exists, interaction is increased between adjacent individuals.

Waiting spaces

The obvious example of a sociofugal setting is the waiting space in all its various manifestations. Yusoff Abbas, a research student of mine, has completed a very detailed study indeed of how people choose their seat in doctors’ waiting rooms (Abbas 2000). Whilst some people will know each other, most will either not do so or do not wish to talk anyway. In spite of this the vast majority of such spaces are laid out as if there was going to be a meeting of some kind, or in some cases even a performance! Unfortunately in our study we were not able to move the seats around in order to show how they could create a more sympathetic setting (Fig. 6.9). It is extraordinary that doctors who should be concerned about the whole of their patient’s welfare seem so blind to the simple and totally cost-free actions they could take to make the all too frequently long wait more pleasant. A while ago I had to visit the outpatients’ department of one of the leading teaching hospitals, which is related to my university. During a long and tedious