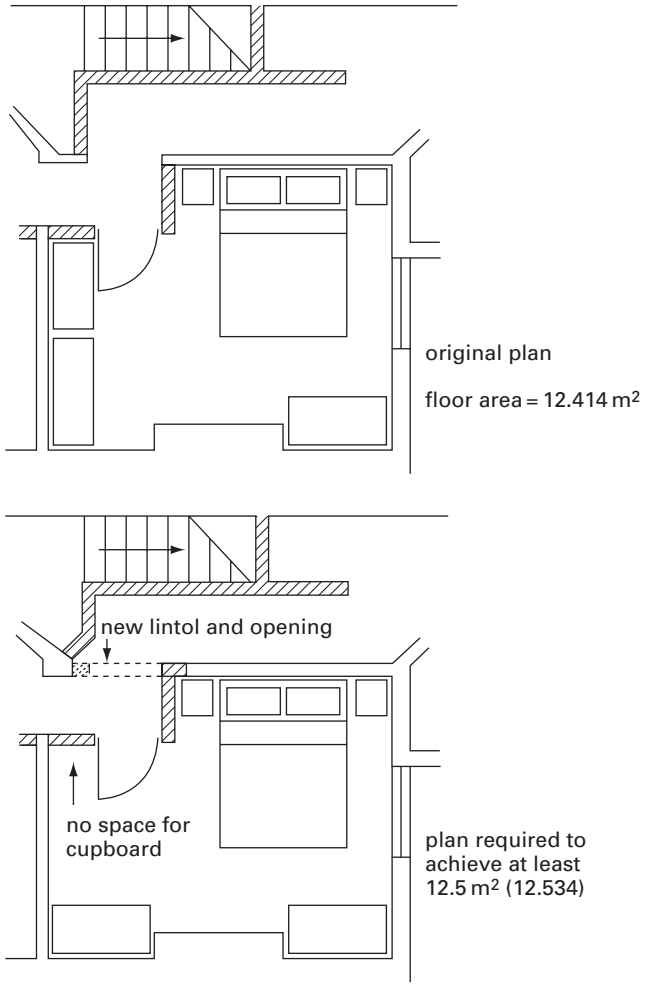

Figure 13.9
Legislators fall into the number trap – the second plan has a larger floor area as required but can accommodate less furniture and is more expensive

the minimum size. This solution was achieved at considerable cost which could hardly be considered value for money. However, even more ridiculously, the actual usable space was now probably lower. As a result of moving the door the space behind it when open was now less than the width of normal furniture preventing the location of a wardrobe or chest of drawers there. In the new design therefore a dressing-table could no longer be fitted in. However the local authority, taking seriously their responsibility for protecting the public by maintaining minimum standards, insisted on the change! They were truly ensnared by the number trap!

Such faith do we place in numbers that arguments in favour of a design which has some lower number than an alternative will frequently fall on deaf ears! Often the gains are difficult to quantify and, therefore, not easily expressed as in the case shown here.

The icon trap

We saw in Chapter 2 how the idea of designing by drawing separated the process of design from that of making or constructing. Today design by drawing is commonplace, to the extent that we shall devote the whole of the next chapter to the subject. Here, however, we shall see how such a powerful tool as the drawing can itself easily become a trap for designers. The design drawing is powerful because, as Jones (1970) pointed out, it gives the designer a 'greater perceptual span'. Thus, designers can see the whole of their proposal and experiment with that image rather than having to try things out in full-scale construction.

However, the drawing itself can easily become a trap for the designer. All designers are, by nature visually sensitive and graphically skilled, so they like to make beautiful drawings and models which, these days, may not just be physical but might be elaborate computer constructions. It is all too easy for the designer gradually to become more interested in what the drawing looks like in its own right, rather than what it represents. Fashions come and go in design drawing styles and media almost as much as they do in design itself.

Some years ago the famous architect James Stirling developed a distinct penchant for axonometrics drawn from below looking up as a kind of 'worm's eye view' rather than the more conventional 'bird's eye view'. A whole generation of architecture students started to imitate this, using these drawings throughout the design process. In many cases decisions were being taken in order that the drawing would compose well rather than the building. Of course we never see buildings from a 'worm's eye view, and rarely from the 'bird's eye view'. But then neither do we ever see buildings in plan or section and rarely do we get near seeing a true elevation. As we shall see in the next chapter, all drawings have their shortcomings as well as their possibilities. There is nothing wrong in producing beautiful presentations, so long as they continue to do their job of revealing and communicating the design so it can be properly understood and thoroughly examined.

The image trap

The designer invariably has an image of the final design held in his or her mind. However, there can often be a mismatch between intention and realisation in design. Over the years I have listened to