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Caring about Place

The places in which we meet carry a message about our intentions as clear as any verbal presentation or agenda. The problem is that we have forgotten how important physical space is in influencing our actions. We know how we are changed when we walk into a church, or a courthouse, or an intimate restaurant or courtyard. There is a spirit, a statement of intent, a congruence between the space and the purpose, that reinforces our own reason for being there. Our work spaces, designed to carry the message of efficiency, hierarchical status, and restraint, fly in the face of engagement.

It is almost impossible to find a room in an office building or a hotel that is suited for dialogue and participation. They are mostly suited for instruction and persuasion. To begin with, most of the tables are rectangular. If you sit on either side of a rectangular table, you cannot see most of the people on your side of the table. It's hard to engage people you cannot see. Putting the tables in a U shape or a square still blinds us to a third or a fourth of those in the room. Boardrooms are the worst. The tables are fixed and monumental. It clearly was never expected that real conversation would be required.

Beyond the problems with the furniture, training and meeting rooms are primarily designed for persuasion and display, either with the speaker in the room or a speaker in another location. Most of the new money spent to design meeting space goes into electronics and projection equipment. In some cases, rooms designed for fewer than thirty people have over $250,000 in the walls, floors, and ceiling. With this kind of investment in the walls, you are not about to have the seats facing each other.

What does this say about our beliefs about connecting and communicating? Each time the room is arranged for people to interact with the speaker rather than each other, we reinforce passive contact and the values of a bureaucratic culture. It doesn't matter, then, what is said, as the structure of the room carries its own message. We will spend a fortune on talking to someone we cannot see, and in the process arrange the room so that we all face the front and face the wall. These rooms are artifacts of an industrialized and electronic culture. We are in love with technology in a way that far exceeds our interest in connecting with each other. To say that the technology connects us is a myth. It confuses information exchange with human interaction. There is nothing wrong with the technology; we just exaggerate its usefulness.

In a broader sense, we are culturally blind about the power of the physical place. We are willing to meet in rooms without windows, walls without color or pictures, doors with no moldings. Windows,

color, art, and architectural detail bring life and humanity into a setting. If you are in the business of change, running meetings, convening people, it is almost impossible to find a room for work that is designed for people to feel alive and really talk to each other.

The Auditorium, Cafeteria, and Other Places That Defy Engagement

The one room in our culture that most symbolizes the patriarchal nature of our ways of bringing people together is the auditorium—especially the corporate auditorium. We have a stage where the speaker is elevated and can be seen by all. We have several hundred seats in rows, bolted to the floor all facing forward. The lighting and the sound system are designed to illuminate and amplify only the speaker. There is usually a podium, which is its own command-and-control system. From there you can control the screen, slides, sound, and computer-generated graphics. The podium has a button to raise and lower itself, so it can be customized to the height of the speaker. You can even control time itself, with clocks showing actual time, elapsed time, and time to lift off. For the audience we have house lights and, at best, a remote microphone that can be passed around by hand for audience questions or comments.

If we convene over fifty people and don't use an auditorium, we move to the cafeteria or a ballroom at a local hotel. Both of these are designed for eating, not for meeting. They are a little more flexible than the auditorium, but if your intent is to bring groups of people together for the sake of engagement, you are fighting the space that is available.

Even when we have some flexibility to arrange the room for participation, we often don't do it. We don't even see that the space given to us interferes with our purpose. If our goal is to have all voices heard, to have peers treat each other as important as the leader, if we want the leader to come off of the pedestal and join the institution simply as a powerful member, you can't have the boss and the consultant standing on a stage talking down to the troops.

The Circle

The physical symbol for participation and engagement is a circle. Round tables put each of us in sight of everyone else. Seats in a circle do the same. Even a room full of round tables has an interactive effect. Don't worry about having some people with their backs to the front. The action is not in the front of the room; it is at the tables. Eventually we will have whole rooms and buildings designed to hold the circle. Some businesses are there already. Saturn and Harley-Davidson have understood the importance of the circle in the design of their buildings.

Other organizations are also experimenting with new communal space. The Boeing Company has “visibility” rooms designed to continually display the goals, values, and progress of large projects. A senior executive at Boeing started to experiment with the structure of his visibility room in order to get deeper participation. First he got rid of the large table and had only chairs with a few, low coffee tables to put stuff on. Then he brought in plants, to add some life to the environment. They then noticed that the fluoresent lighting was cold and institutional, so they brought in floor lamps. This, however, was going too far. It started to feel like a living room. Out came the lamps, but the chairs and the plants remained, testament to the intent to design a room for open dialogue and human encounter. Still, isn’t it interesting that a living room—a room for living, a room to nurture life—seemed so uncomfortably out of place at work?

The point is not that there is a right design for a room—it is about our consciousness about the importance and power of space. As we become more conscious about the impact of how we physically come together, we will start to redesign our common space. This will require the joint effort of furniture designers, architects, hotel executives, organizational real estate people, and those of us who convene the meetings.

The physical space for our implementation meetings is not just a question of flexibility; it carries a message of habitability, of whether this place was designed for human beings or machines. Most commercial workplaces are designed for machines, or machinelike efficiency. Blank walls, colored in gray or white, remind us that the human spirit has been institutionalized. There is little art or humanity on the walls of the corridors or meeting rooms or reception areas. If there is art, it is usually pictures of company history, products, or buildings. Kind of like the Stalinist art of the Soviet Union, where the only images allowed were the ones that glorified the state. Maybe I am getting carried away, but you get the point.

Your Choice

Whatever the space you are given to work in, you always have a choice. Even in an auditorium, people can talk to each other across the rows, or stand up, or move into the aisles or to the front of the room. If you do have a choice, try just chairs—no tables. You will get some complaints, but they are worth absorbing for the flexibility and the message that the space carries.