



VIEWPOINT

Victoria Ward asks, “Can the design of physical space influence collaboration?”

How can we resolve the conflict between designing space for observation and reflection, space for control and efficiency, and space that encourages collaboration?

We know enough about knowledge management to understand that conversation is the key – the best transfers are personal and serendipitous. But developing insight needs time for reflection as well as communication. The need for serendipity, however, works against prescribed theories of order, process and management, and creates the paradox of knowledge management.

Building open minded spaces

In *Small Cities for a Compact Planet*,¹ Richard Rogers cites Michael Walzer’s two types of urban spaces: “single minded” spaces that fulfill single functions (i.e: houses and car parks); and “open minded” spaces that are multi-functional and participative (i.e: parks and cafes). In open minded spaces, urgency is replaced by an inclination to engage with other people. Open minded space, therefore, can be seen as a metaphor for knowledge space.

Now put this into a 21st century context. As new working models emerge, so must new models for structural design, which have hitherto been aimed at the optimization of efficiency and control. A new entrepreneurial culture is upon us, and spacial design can provide the backbone for collaborative working. But this requires a change in attitude towards organizational design, and a move towards the following spacial models:

1. *The workplace as habitat.* Stephen Acker’s essay on space and collaboration² notes that the workplace often leaves us nowhere to hide. Knowledge “shelters” need to be created for

reflection and mediation.

2. *Density and boundaries.* In his essay on city structures *The Uses of Disorder*,³ Richard Sennett describes the benefits of proximity.

Forced encounters break down boundaries and enable different communities to understand each other better. When applying this to communities, it’s perhaps wiser to design weak borders than strong walls.

3. *Ritual.* In Italy, there is a daily ritual known as the *passeggiata*. In the early evening, the streets are filled with people taking a stroll. This ritual makes time for chance meetings and conversation.

4. *Performance spaces.* A research fund wanted to reassess the role of its building in order to foster collaboration in its extended community (clients, associates and policy makers). The building was often praised by the public, but spaces that should “buzz” were cold and lifeless. We used a theater designer to help the fund see its physical space from a different angle and shift its understanding of space and function.

5. *Artefacts.* Clive Holtham of City University Business School⁴ stresses the importance of artefacts in the workplace. This is increasingly being realized in offices, such as the British Airways Waterside complex, where art has been introduced to encourage creativity.

6. *Third places.* This concept, devised by The Henley Centre in the UK, emphasises the need for a “third place” to meet and spark ideas, as home working becomes more common. The way in

which organizations manage knowledge workers must adapt to this change and create third places to accommodate new ways of working.

7. *Markets.* Markets, exchanges and bazaars are all open minded spaces. In the emerging knowledge markets, such as the virtual exchange IQPort⁵, the informal, reciprocal exchange of knowledge is becoming a formal process which connects information and price to establish the value of knowledge.

Striking a balance

Designing knowledge space is a critical component of a knowledge management strategy. The designer needs to create a balance between privacy and exposure, recognizing that organizations, like cities, consist of two types of interactions – structural and human.

Knowledge management needs to balance traditional order and supervision with real or virtual spaces where people can discover what they know. Spaces might be as intangible as research projects, intranets, interactive events and training programs or as structural as libraries, cafes or team meeting rooms. These are all spaces that can encourage discovery and sharing.

Knowledge spaces should be safe havens in which to experiment, fail, learn from failure, and apply these lessons to the next project – in effect, spaces that are designed for knowledge are designed for survival.⁶

References.

1. Rogers, Richard. *Cities for a Compact Planet*. 1997
2. Acker, Stephen R. *Space, Collaboration and the Credible City: Academic Work in the Virtual University*. 1999 www.ascusc.org
3. Sennett, Richard. *The Conscience of the Eye*. 1990
4. Holtham, Clive. Various papers on space.
5. www.iqport.com
6. Spark Knowledge’s founding article 1997



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