

THE ARCHITECTURE OF PARTICIPATION

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A SENSE OF SPACE

I have always had a strong sense of space, developed perhaps as my family moved from place to place as my father's job required. We always fixed up our new space, making it reflect our family values and needs, and creating a pleasant space in which to live. In my first job out of graduate school, I worked with a dynamic woman who was passionate about the role space arrangement played in the learning environment. Our job was to transform a drab building into an inviting space for children. As we painted chairs, hung pictures, arranged tables, and planted flowers, I learned about the importance of intentional space arrangement to the effectiveness of an overall learning environment. I have never forgotten those lessons. They have served me well as a facilitator of group meetings. In this capacity I have continued to travel and work in many different locales around the world. In Asia, Europe, South and North America alike, the yin/yang of skillful facilitation and responsible participation was enhanced or hindered by the space I was working in.

Participative meetings take place in many kinds of spaces. I've facilitated meetings in school cafeterias, dining rooms, penthouses, courtrooms, boardrooms, ballrooms, porches, under tents, in club lounges, offices, training rooms, store fronts, libraries, living rooms, and village meeting halls. In all of these, it took forethought and preparation to make the energy of the space work for participation, not against it.

Every space conveys a certain atmosphere, climate. Just think of the different feelings you get when you enter a cathedral, a factory floor, a forest glen, a courtroom, a boardroom, a meditation room, or a gymnasium. Some spaces have a sense of calm and harmony, others of purposeful activity, some of chaotic energy and others a sense of awe. Every space has a particular energy that is felt by those who enter. The design and arrangements of meeting spaces convey a message about the kind of activity and demeanor that is appropriate to it and have a noticeable effect on those who enter it.

Feng Shui: Ancient Chinese Wisdom about Space

The ancient Chinese had a strong sense of place and use of space. Well over three thousand years ago, the practice of *feng shui* emerged to help people live their lives in harmony and dynamic balance with the forces of energy of the earth and nature in their environment. To do so made practical sense given their interdependence on the land and their agricultural livelihood. To do so seemed to bring happiness, prosperity, good health and good luck. The practice of feng shui works to create harmony and balance in one's surroundings. It is built on the belief that the "breath of life, or Chi, fills and flows through all people, places, and things, bringing life and fullness" (Bender, 2003, p. 1) Feng shui experts advise people how to optimize the beneficial energy flow in the spatial decisions of buildings, and work and living spaces and

how to avoid a negative flow of energy. To this end, feng shui experts will advise on the placement of furnishing, seating arrangements, decorative elements and overall design of the work or living space. In the five years I worked with organizations in Hong Kong and China I became aware of how much the practice of feng shui continues today as new interpretations and applications emerge from the still relevant foundational principles. It is well known that the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank considered advice from feng shui masters when they built a new 47-story headquarters in the Central District of Hong Kong (Wydra, 1995, p. 7). Growing interest in and application of feng shui is evident in professional offices (Williams, unpublished paper, p.5) and in other geographic locations. It is possible today, in Reno, Nevada, where I live, to take classes in feng shui at the local community colleges and to engage a feng shui practitioner to give advice about your home or place of business. "Feng shui posits that our accomplishments in life are influenced by the places where we live and work" (Wydra, p.6). In meetings where people work together to solve problems, hold discussions, make decisions, and plan. I find that the design, arrangement, and "feel" of the physical environment of meeting rooms contribute greatly to the quality of the outcomes of the meeting or detract from accomplishing the desired outcomes. This factor is often overlooked by leaders in their preparation for a meeting.

Much of feng shui is based on what we call common sense, a sense of the appropriateness of design to achieve a certain purpose along with a feel for color and shape. Architects apply their knowledge of the dynamics of color, shape, lighting, position and movement in their designs to create a harmonious place for people to live and work. Mediators are quite aware of the importance of equalizing the power between parties with the seating arrangements in their session. (Williams, p.2) Intuitively perhaps, or through practice, effective facilitators are aware of and utilize similar dynamics of space design to beckon group participation and enhance the positive energy flow in meetings as much as they use effective techniques for dialogue and decision making.

THE CHANGING FORM OF MEETINGS

One of the fundamental shifts in our time is that people are demanding a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Organizational leadership is becoming more facilitative as leaders explore ideas together with staff and ask for input from those closer to the customer. In these participative meetings people work together to problem-solve, improve procedures, discover more effective ways to serve customers, and deal with complex issues that have no obvious, simple solutions. The outcome is not imposed by the boss but emerges from the group's discussions and decisions. This requires the whole group to think and work together in new interactive ways.

Most meeting rooms block participation rather than beckon it by the arrangement of the furnishings. Winston Churchill said, "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us." Mainstream images and standard operating procedures of a previous time influenced meeting room design with all seating facing the front of the room where the expert or the boss is expected to tell others what to do or how to do something. The focus is on the speaker or leader in the front of the room. There is little or no interaction between participants and they don't need eye contact with one another. Verbal interaction with the leader is most often limited to

participants sitting near the front of the room. It is difficult for people in the rear to hear and see as well as to be heard and seen. Discussion among small groups of participants is difficult to arrange in venues like auditoriums where the seats are fixed to the floor. The implication of the theatre or classroom style arrangement is that someone up front has something to tell/teach the audience with little participation expected. A panel arrangement in front conveys that the wisdom resides in a few experts, not the audience. A boardroom arrangement, typically around a long, narrow table, indicates somewhat equal participation is expected; however, the person who can be seen and heard best by the other people is the one who sits at the head of the table, usually the chairman.

These space arrangements indicate that the action will take place up front where the group's attention and energy is directed, and primarily around one person, the leader, and communication will be one way, from the leader to the audience. These conditions make these settings inappropriate for participative meetings. The energy or focus of many meetings has shifted with the times and the physical space arrangements need to reflect this shift

In contrast, a participative meeting spreads its attention to everyone in the group, rather than focusing it solely on the leader, and the physical set-up of the room supports this. Participative meetings require seating arrangements that level the playing field and indicate that the participants as well as the leader have experience and expertise that will be shared. The seating arrangements also indicate that in the meeting no one participant has more power or status than another. The seating arrangements need to be flexible and easily moved as a participative meeting usually includes activities that require people to move out of their seats and into small sub-group or teams for periods of time. The focus of the meeting shifts to the group's work rather than on the leader's words. The front of the room becomes the space where the group's ideas and decisions are scribed, usually on flip chart pages or white boards, and increasingly today, electronically. This record becomes the group memory. It may also consist of visual images such as charts, graphs, templates which may be drawn or projected. These are displayed on what I call a "front working wall," a large, flat, uninterrupted wall space on which to attach chart paper or to project images.

MEETING ROOM ARRANGEMENTS THAT BECKON PARTICIPATION

Three key physical elements must be considered and carefully arranged to beckon participation in a meeting. They are:

1. the size and shape of various kinds of spaces in relationship to the group size
2. the physical arrangement of the furniture
3. the "feel" of the space as people walk into the room.

Size and Shape of Meeting Rooms

Some architectural elements such as walls, windows, doors, ceilings and flooring are not changeable and should therefore be taken into account in the selection of the meeting location. Facilitators learn how to work with or around elements that block participation and can't be changed, or to avoid venues with unworkable space. In every instance the facilitator needs to take into consideration the group size, the room size, the purpose of the meeting and the activities involved. The front of the room is of great importance in this type of meeting and is usually the first aspect of a proposed meeting space that a facilitator will evaluate. In some rooms the most appropriate wall may not be the one usually considered the front of the room. Sometimes a side wall provides the best unobstructed working space, and becomes the "front working wall" and the seating is arranged to face it.

Everyone needs to be able to visually access the information recorded and displayed at the front working wall of the room. The room should be clear of pillars, permanent dividers or structural aspects that jut out into the room and interrupt this line-of-sight. Participants need to be able to hear all the dialogue around the topic being discussed in order to fully participate in the meeting. Therefore, the seating arrangements need to minimize the maximum distance between participants and minimize visual disruptions between any two people and between any person and the shared record. Sometimes the facilitator will use a corner of the room as the front of the meeting space if the two side walls are unobstructed and provide better wall space. This arrangement also works when the space is too large for the size of the group, putting the large empty space behind the group.

For a small group in a large room, the amount of empty space is overwhelming and can give a sense of insignificance to the work they are doing. If the room is too small in proportion to the number of participants, a group may feel crowded and therefore edgy or uncomfortable being elbow to elbow, especially with people they don't know, which can stifle creativity; some might find it claustrophobic. Physical and emotional comfort comes first in the minds of most meeting participants. Safety concerns and fire regulations have to be factored in figuring out room capacity.

In addition to appropriate room size and a workable front wall, factors that must be considered are table and chair style and arrangements, acoustics, climate, lighting, electrical, electronic and audio/visual capabilities, refreshments, data display capabilities, décor, and breakout spaces. Although this seems a lot to consider, experienced facilitators can in a glance look at a potential meeting space and know immediately what will work well for the meeting and what will need to be adjusted or modified.

Allen Hickling, a facilitator, working with an architect-designer friend, drew up the following design brief for an "ideal" meeting room or decision space. It can be used as a list of factors to consider when evaluating the space for a participative meeting:

- Clear space, free of columns and changes of level is needed for groups of six to thirty people – must allow for a wide variety of seating configurations – mostly semi-circular,

focused on a wall, but also more conventional – square plan format will serve most layouts best.

- Easy access to ‘alternative’ space (ideally interior and exterior) – interior ‘alternative’ space could be a very wide hallway outside the room (also accommodating coffee supply?) – exterior could be terrace or balcony (in either case access should be as direct as possible).
- As much uninterrupted wall space as possible – large, flat, with durable surface – should be minimum 2.5m high – if possible one ‘working’ wall big enough to accommodate up to twenty flip chart sheets in two rows – about 7m long with doors in other walls.
- Windows are desirable – where possible opposite the ‘working’ wall – none actually on the ‘working’ wall – views out to avoid claustrophobia, but beware of glare – high-level or rooflights.
- Subdividing partition system must be acoustically effective and provide a hard, flat, rigid working surface, probably heavy but needs to be easily handled.
- Artificial lighting must provide an even all-over basic level of light, but at the same time a focus on the walls – arrangements should be very flexible (with dimming capability?) – must cover walls evenly – floods, no spots.
- Furniture should be reasonable comfortable (but not too much so) – easy to move around (lightweight) – suitable for a wide variety of arrangements – modular system of tables (could be 0.75m x 0.75m or 0.75m x 1.5,) – no ‘specialty’ shapes, but with specially designed resilient edges to avoid damage when they are moved frequently – seating for four or six per table.
- Wide variety of technical support (for example projectors of various types, and perhaps computer aid) to be provided without obstruction of the process – multiple options for access to power supply – no fixed technical apparatus.
- Easy access to a continuous supply of refreshments, and toilets and other services – communications, data, copying and stationery supplies, secretarial, etc. [pp. 172-173].

Physical Arrangement of Furnishings

Just as there is no one right way to facilitate meetings, there is no one right room arrangement that works for all meetings. Each facilitator discerns how the space can be utilized to support the outcome of that particular meeting and their particular facilitation style. For example, round tables are preferred by some facilitators for the more informal, small group work atmosphere they convey. These usually seat 6 (5-foot diameter table) to 10 (8-foot diameter table) persons. The 10-person size places people too far apart to easily converse except with those seated on either side of them. In any case, always leave one or two places vacant at round tables, so that no one sits with their back to the front of the room. Some prefer a ‘living room or lounge’ type of arrangement for the type of meeting they facilitate. They feel that tables create a barrier between the facilitator and participants or between participants. Others want tables for serious working meetings, especially those that use information in documents and need table space for those items as well as the ubiquitous and important coffee cups.

In a participative meeting, the communication, focus and energy flow from the facilitator to the participants swirls around the group in their discussion or dialogue, back to the group memory and out again to the participants many times over. The seating arrangements must enable this

flow, not block it. Some sort of semi-circular seating arrangement best enables this energy flow. Three common seating arrangements (lecture, boardroom, and theatre) that block participation for the reasons mentioned above. There are arrangements that beckon participation. These are all somewhat semi-circular in shape and the working wall is at the open end of these arrangements which allows all participants to access it visually. They allow the participants to have eye contact with the facilitator and all (if not, then a majority) of the other participants, and to read facial expressions and body language so important in discussions leading to consensus.

Many meetings need space for the whole group to be together for some portion of the meeting with other space arranged for small group work. Seating needs to be flexible and easily moved into different configurations, such as small sub-groupings for certain activities. These spaces can be in separate but convenient breakout rooms, or if the meeting space is large enough and the acoustics are good, groups can meet around small tables or in chair circles in the rear of the larger room without disturbing each other. Sometimes the energy generated with lots of creative activity in the same large space is preferred to dispersing the group. Especially in long meetings, facilitators may have the group meet in a different space or to rearrange the existing space for a "change of pace." Like feng shui experts they rearrange furnishings and décor to enable the positive energy to flow freely in the meeting and support the planned activities.

Often clients who decide to involve staff or constituents in facilitated planning or decision-making book space in a favorite venue, unaware of how the physical setting affects the style of this new type of meeting. The importance of the meeting location and room arrangements in participative meetings needs to be part of the client conversation and contracting process from the beginning rather than tacked on just prior to the meeting date. Experienced facilitators know this often entails educating the client in advance of the meeting about the importance of space dynamics to support the outcomes of the meeting. Have a page of your meeting room specifications with set-up diagrams to give to and discuss with the client and the person designated to handle the logistics of the meeting.

Large Group Participative Meetings. Very large groups (50 -200 participants) move space requirements into another level. All of the above factors must still be considered. Much has been learned in the past fifteen years about how to work with large groups in large spaces by those engaged in large group conferences such as Future Search (Weisbord and Janoff, 1995, pp. 69-171), Real-Time Strategic Change (Jacobs, pp. 57, 252), and Participative Strategic Planning (Spencer, 1989, pp. 82-84). The space must convey the unity of the whole group as well as provide smaller spaces for break-out work groups. Both the space design and the processes used must create the physical, emotional and work environment important for the group to stay engaged, focused, comfortable, and productive in a large setting. One solution is to have smaller simultaneous working meetings bracketed by whole group plenary sessions for the opening context and focus and the closing reports and reflection.

Electronic Meeting Support Arrangements. The rising popularity of electronic meeting support systems (EMS) brings another factor into meeting space design. Many facilitators are beginning to use available systems and programs for capturing ideas, opinions, votes, and decisions electronically. A number of designs and arrangements of such meeting spaces can be found in Bostrom, Watson and Kinney (1992). The room set-up needs to allow the facilitator to move

around the room rather than being “stuck” in one spot to utilize the equipment. Optional arrangements that support participation:

- Peripheral - tables/computers around the edge of the room facing the walls. During group discussions, participants can move their chairs facing into the center of the room or in smaller groups around tables.
- Workstations - two or four computers in clusters support small group discussions.
- All computers along one wall, as sort of data-input section with room for group discussion in another area of the room. Or, all terminals are clustered around the technographer in a space separate from the discussion and decision making area.

Important considerations for all arrangements are the number and location of cable and power outlets.:

The Feel of the Space

In addition to the physical arrangements described above, facilitators can create an inviting environment that is noticeable upon walking into the meeting room. Be sure the room is prepared before participants arrive. Obviously, the space must be clean. Sometimes, if the room has not been cleaned or straightened by the janitor, the facilitator needs to see that this happens, even doing it herself, when necessary. Arrange for the often overlooked wastebaskets to be included. Chairs should be evenly spaced and, if tables are used, aligned with the tables. Make sure materials are set out on tables in an orderly manner to communicate care has gone into the meeting preparation. If folders or notebooks are used, I make sure the bottom edges are parallel with the edge of the table, not haphazardly placed. Attractive covers on these add a colorful note in the room.

I often place posters with quotations on the walls. They help fill the space in colorful and intriguing ways, especially helpful in claiming undesirable aspects of a room such as structural posts or permanently attached distracting mirrors or pictures. They also provide an indirect focus on the topic or process or occasion, and give another place for wandering eyes and minds to ponder. I print a few quotes that highlight some aspect of the session in a large size, easy to read font and attach them to large colorful construction or poster paper with a glue stick or mounting spray. An 11”X14” size fits in the top of a suitcase when I fly. Larger ones go into a portfolio. I’ve also had a copy shop enlarge the quotes to poster size on colored paper to use in ballroom settings with large groups. A quote I often use is this statement of Peter Senge’s, “Each person’s view is a unique perspective on a larger reality. If I can look out through your view and you through mine, we may both see something we might not see alone.” (Senge, 1990, p.248). I think it supports the spirit of participation that I try to enable in a meeting.

An inviting refreshment area, fresh flowers, interesting three dimensional décor appropriately placed, music playing softly in the background indicate that care has gone into the preparation for this meeting and that someone has taken time and effort to make this a pleasant space in which to meet. A greeting from the leader as people come into the meeting adds to the inviting feel of the space. During breaks, pick up discarded paper cups, napkins, and crumpled paper to keep the space free of unnecessary clutter so that when people return the space continues to

communicate an invitation to creative work, a profound respect for the participants, and let's good energy flow through the room.

Jo Nelson, former President of the International Association of Facilitation (IAF), has a sculpture of three figures arm-in-arm in a circle that she often uses in the middle of the front table or on a table in the middle of the room. She says "we don't always talk about it, but when people get distracted, it is there to bring their attention back to the group. It also symbolizes the circle that is the group."(Nelson, 1998, email message)

ASSESSING AND ADAPTING SPACE

Part of the responsibility of a facilitator is to assess the space ahead of time and decide whether it will support the meeting under consideration. ALWAYS check out the space ahead of the meeting, at least by the night before the meeting. Often the space has been reserved and travel arrangements made before a facilitator is hired. If the meeting is in another locale, you need to communicate with the client about your space needs, sending a list of requirements and a floor plan for the meeting you will facilitate. Rarely is everything to your liking, so don't leave this until the hour before the meeting. In a hotel, convention center or public space, talk with the meeting coordinator and/or the facilities staff person in charge of your space. Enlist their help to re-arrange whatever will optimize a productive meeting. Explain graciously what is needed and why but stand your ground as to its importance.

Most times it is not possible to work in an ideal space. When assessing a space the first aspect I consider is the front working wall and other usable wall space. Almost simultaneously I consider the seating arrangement of tables and chairs in relationship to that wall that will work for optimal inclusion, participation and focus. Then I consider the other factors of lighting, acoustics, climate, and equipment. If it appears that, as is, the space will not enable participation there are alternatives to consider: decline the job, get agreement to change the venue to a better space, modify activities in the agenda design, and/or adjust some of the most distracting factors.

For example, in rooms with less than adequate wall space I have found a number of ways to create a working wall in an otherwise unusable room. I've used six 8 ft. tables with legs folded and leaned side by side up against the wall to provide a flat space for the flip charts and group memory. I have used large pieces of foam-core board, long sides masking-taped together on the back, to make a smooth wall. In small meetings, I have arranged several flipchart stands with solid backs side by side to create a 'front wall', or placed foam-core horizontally across the flipchart stands. I've had moveable partitions built that created flat wall space and also blocked off unneeded space, creating a wonderful working area. Cheryl Kartes, a facilitator in Minneapolis, has developed a moveable easel that consists of a framework made of aluminum tubing that is collapsible, light weight, and transportable. It holds a large sheet of foam core or plywood board that becomes the 'wall'. It creates a usable "front working wall" in a room with no uninterrupted wall space. This kind of flexibility allows a facilitator to divide up a large space or to hold meetings in places like libraries that have few accessible walls. Like feng shui practitioners, we can bring balance and harmony into less than optimal venues.

As I prepare a room for a meeting, I think about the group that will be working with me as I begin to create the place where we will spend our time and energy in collaborative work. I adjust or even rearrange tables and chairs and flip chart stands to more adequately invite participation. I create a visual focus on the front wall of the room with a quotation, create small group space if needed, put colorful poster quotations on other walls, and place a small plant or flowers on the registration or refreshment table if there is one. Markers and post-its and other materials may go into colorful containers such as baskets made of plastic or natural materials placed on the tables for participants to use. I might place a piece of three dimensional décor on a table to fill an otherwise large empty space. Doing these activities almost becomes a ritual for me, helping me center myself before the participants arrive. As the room takes shape it is filled with an inviting energy.

CONCLUSION

The facilitator is responsible for creating an environment that evokes participation. Long before the session begins decisions about the physical setting, the emotional climate, and purposeful agenda design are made to achieve the targeted outcomes of the meeting. Space arrangements, together with appropriate group processes and facilitator style can bring a vibrant energy, wholeness and balance into group deliberations and dialogue by honoring all participants, making it easy to hear and see all input, and not letting one position adversely dominate the discussion. The physical setting becomes a comfortable and safe container in which the facilitated discussions, consensus decision-making and win/win solutions occur that engender ownership, commitment and move a group into action. Its importance is such that effective facilitators will always take the time needed to pay detailed attention to it.

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