An Anthropologist’s Angst  
By Karen Stephenson, Ph.D.

Here’s the rub: Most business leaders - most people for that matter - don’t see space, only the objects that occupy space. To see space or more precisely, the shape of space is quite a stretch. To go further and suggest that the shape of space can be folded as well as financially measured is an idea more suited to calculus than culture; more in line with science fiction fantasies than business financial reports. However strange this notion may seem, it’s the truth! After all, individual employees, quantified as human capital, can be sorted and inserted into various performance measures that capture the value of a company’s brain trust. If you can map and measure a brain trust, then you can use workplace planning to attract, manage and retain it. It is one of the more challenging tasks for leaders in this century.

One promising way to meet this challenge is through the collaboration of architects and designers with business leaders in answering this question: How do valued employees interact with space, culture and workplace? First they must consider how the component parts of the puzzle fit together – the physical space (the building or community), the social capital (the trusted connections within a culture) and the virtual or third space (the e-collective). Whoever can solve this Rubik’s cube will go a long way to eliminating cultural malaise, drops in productivity and corporate sabotage. This is the challenge for the next century; and strangely enough it was foreseen by the philosopher Michel Foucault¹ a century earlier:

“The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing though time than that of a network that connects points and intersections with its own skein.”

How could Foucault have seen this coming? Well, for one thing, he conducted his own research. He actually traced the transformation of space from the simple concept of location in seventeenth-century physics to a fixed location occupied by the disciplined individual in the eighteenth century and finally to the regulated workplace of the 19th century. Acting more like an archaeologist than a philosopher, he methodically pieced together a forensic analysis that included the architectural examination of prisons, factories, asylums, hospitals, and schools. What he found wasn’t pretty.

In each of the institutions he investigated, he found a built cultural reality whereby people were placed in a line of cells or cubicles, side by side in a suburb. The result was that each individual had become fixed in a place, constantly and consistently located, observed and measured. The vestiges of this kind of thinking are in evidence today when you walk into any corporation or university. The unfortunate irony is that we’re keep doing it to ourselves. Every day, we unwittingly cage (and enrage) ourselves with old-fashioned thinking rooted in a bygone Industrial Era. Behind the corporate veil lurks hierarchical planning, those Dilbertian cubicles where we partition ourselves from one another and where space is reduced to its leanest and meanest economic essentials. With time, any sentient human being can be transformed into a docile Stepford drone disciplined to serve. Sounds Orwellian and it is. Corporate space planning, when it isn’t done correctly, is a killing field.

Is it any wonder why so many employees run to the vast savannahs of the Internet to drink in a newfound sense of freedom? Instead of succumbing to becoming nothing more than a vanishing point in a warehouse of cubicles, MySpace, LinkedIn and YouTube promise us that we can be creators and actors in a thriving knowledge and social economy! With geography dead, even the “corner office” is nonchalantly forfeited as millennials trade away their primordial need to be physically proximal for the simultaneity of an Internet response – intimacy achieved through immediacy. Virtual is becoming THE preferred mode.

Is this really a picture of our collective future? I say "No".

My Space doesn’t translate into “no space” for it will never replace our primordial need to be PROPINQUITOUS². Instead, the Internet simply cut a swath through our physical parochialism permitting a new way to view the world. Social networking tools have emerged precisely because of the way we have allowed ourselves to live in gated professional and personal suburbs. But as bland as those suburbs are, we won’t ever abandon familial and familiar physical propinquity because it still meets a primordial need for physical intimacy – that fluid sense of belonging to a community and which is inexorably linked to the raw territorialism of our past. The Internet simply added another dimension to an ancient space-time continuum, shining a light on the sterile corporate office and exposing its deficiencies for everyone to see and understand.

The integration and interaction of space with culture together make a powerful code. So powerful in fact that we have decoded it and are now using a culture’s DNA to inform workplace decisions. If we fully understand how the space of a workplace can be shaped, folded and measured, then we can appreciably impact human productivity and improve business performance. We are neither slave to space, technology nor internet, but architects of our own social destiny and physical environments. In the future, this means we can and should improve the greater good through both design and DNA. One is not achieved at the expense of the other, but together. We are tip-toeing out onto this new frontier. How will you as business owners and architects respond to this challenge? You may have decided on your destiny, but how will you design it?

Dr. Stephenson is a Harvard trained anthropologist who by accident stumbled from ancient digs to more modern ones – and discovered, developed and designed a rapid cultural diagnosis incorporating physical space to stimulate needed change. You may read about her work at www.drkaren.us or www.drkaren.co.uk.

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² To be physically proximate.
WHEN WE CONNECT,
WE ARE
GROUND IN TRUST
AND
BOUND BY SPACE