Neutral Spaces. The Close Relationship Between Professional And Educational Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the new teaching university spaces, which are similar to the work areas of a creative company spaces that simultaneously stimulate students, professors, visitors, etc. They respond to the different needs of all these types of users. These spaces are referred to as Neutral Spaces in this article.

In the area of education, the Bologna Plan’s implementation has brought the academic context closer to the professional context. This change has required the players involved in these dynamics to develop skills and competencies that stimulate collaborative work, connectivity, creativity and an entrepreneurial outlook. Without doubt, it has also brought us closer to the needs of innovative companies and progressively to the need for teaching spaces, which are more akin to workspaces.

The main focus is placed on the analysis of new educational spaces in universities and in the collaboration between university and business, both are principal aspects in the investigation of the Steelcase Chair of educational spaces and facilities. Link the design activities in the European University of Madrid’s academic degree with the company Steelcase, to study the issue of neutral spaces and also with the intention of providing teaching that is intended to be closer to the professional environment.

Keywords: neutral spaces; teaching spaces; university; creative companies, collaboration between university and companies.

INTRODUCTION

Universities have been a physical institution ever since they were first created. The first universities were founded around the 13th century as spaces inherited from monastic cloisters, within which the Absolute Truth was taught. However, due to the increase in student numbers, their architectural typology evolved in the 1960s towards large complexes situated in the suburbs, which were segregated from cities.

Today the university as a “City of Knowledge” is no longer strictly a physical space due to the advances in technology. A non-physical information-based site was created to take its place, namely the Virtual Campus. Many doubts exist with regards to this concept, since it rivals the universities’ traditional mission of educating...
students through direct contact and physical presence.

Technology is the main factor that has allowed today's society to no longer be subject to, either space or time. In principle, it has freed us greatly of many obligations, but at the same time, it has also invaded our lives and its presence occupies most of our time, leading to a new development of the social structures that could be called “informationalism”¹ (Castells, 1996). Where the concept of Temporary and Physical Space fades, where only the Ontological Space remains, especially with the new possibilities online, as noted by Marc Augé (Augé, 2005).

The world is becoming increasingly intellectual. Cerebral and virtual activities prevail over manual activities, not only during periods of work but also during leisure time. Among intellectual activities, creativity is the most highly valued and has become an essential value for today's society. The stimulus provided by creativity is vital for human beings. De Masi explains the way in which creative groups have exerted an influence on all areas of human knowledge from the industrial revolution to the present day (De Masi, 2000).

Today the work spaces of innovative companies are designed by and for creative people, a large number of whom belong to the Generation Y (Matute, 2007). People who have grown up surrounded by technology, take decisions in real time and demand immediate responses and results.

The extraordinary volatility and flexibility of information, ways of thinking and living, mean that there is a permanent transformation in today's society; a liquid society that is always in a state of flux. The most illustrative example of this idea would be the fashion industry with its continuously changing trends, reflecting a volatile and fluid collective (Bauman, 2007).

On the other hand Richard Florida, an expert in demographic and urban trends, economic competitiveness and technological innovation, complemented Bauman’s theory of “liquid society” (2007) with what he called a “creative society” and their working relationships, understanding human creativity as the driving force of change is the key factor to economic prosperity of society (2010).

These spaces apply a design philosophy that constitutes a radical break with Fordist styles of work, which viewed workers as passive, lineal and isolated from others; similar to the notion of a production chain, where socializing did not take place. In the model now being used by these innovative companies, workers are seen as fluid, mobile and connected assets. They are physically integrated into society through spaces, which stimulate collaboration, debate and dialogue, as well as through virtual spaces like Dropbox, Google Drive or Facebook, among others. We can already see examples of some universities, which are adopting these concepts for their communal areas.

De Masi (2000) explains the fact that creative people need emotion, fantasy and illusion. He justifies that emotion is an essential ingredient for creation. From his viewpoint, a creative person should be a hybrid of reason and emotion. Rationality was a characteristic developed in industrial society, which allows us to materialize ideas and put them into practice. Emotion is a new characteristic that should be encouraged today.

In the area of education in Europe, the Bologna Plan's implementation has brought the academic context closer to the professional context. This change has required the players involved in these dynamics to develop skills and competencies that stimulate collaborative work, connectivity, creativity and an entrepreneurial outlook. Without doubt, it has also brought us closer to the needs of innovative companies and progressively to the need for teaching spaces, which are more akin to workspaces.

Universities will have to place the limelight on spaces that encourage coexistence, meetings and collaboration, where the dynamics and the way of working are no longer the same as in traditional classrooms, and on continuous learning dynamics within and beyond the classroom.

These spaces are similar to the work areas of a creative company, which simultaneously stimulate students, professors, visitors, etc. They are flexible spaces that respond to the different needs of all these kinds of users. These spaces are referred to as “Neutral Spaces” in this article.

¹ Informationalism according to Manuel Castells: is a technological paradigm. It concerns technology, not social organization or institutions. Informationalism provides the basis for a certain type of social structure that Castell calls the ‘network society’. Without informationalism, the network society could not exist, but this new social structure is not a product of informationalism, it is a broader pattern of social evolution.
NEUTRAL SPACES

The design of technology companies’ offices or co-working spaces has to be configured today in a way that encourages open and closed spaces, concentrated work rooms or work in teams, along with informal communication or rest areas. Networks of interchange flows that allows the flow of creativity and socializing with other people to arise and with which the user feels free and at ease. Emotion is thus linked to the most human experience of space and design. A space focused on the individual is therefore created, which is more human and fosters well being. A connected network in which the user at all times chooses the kind of space that best fits in with their needs.

The difference between professional spaces and educational spaces has been diminishing over the years. Today there are without doubt some very strong links between both kinds of environment and it is becoming increasing difficult to set the limits, which separate them. The evolution of society and the new requirements in these areas have gradually led to an increasing similarity. Learning and putting this into practice is today a continuous process that is also reflected in design.

In general terms, the greatest innovations in this regard have arisen in business environments, given that companies are opting for less conventional solutions that favor productivity, along with energy and cost savings.

Figure 1. Pixar. Emeryville, California, USA.

Figure 2. Facebook. Palo Alto, California, USA.
Projects like the office designs for Pixar (Emeryville, California, USA), Facebook (Palo Alto, California, USA) and Google (Zurich, Switzerland) apply these concepts. In the above-mentioned spaces, we can see that emotional and rational components intermingle so workers can make use of the spaces depending on their current needs: spaces for teamwork, individual work or leisure. Diversity in the offering of space typologies is encouraged in these new offices, thereby boosting collaboration and flexibility.

In the university spaces that fulfil this function are called neutral spaces. Based on the document entitled “Guía de criterios de diseño para los espacios administrativos de la UNED” (Design Criteria Guidelines for the UNED’s Administrative Spaces), we propose four concepts that should be used in the so-called university Neutral Spaces.

- Closed collaboration spaces to hold small meetings or activities like workshops or small lectures.
- Open collaboration spaces for informal meetings, concentrated work, teamwork, etc.
- Emotional creative spaces, rest areas, informal meeting and communication areas with low tables and armchairs.
- Concentration spaces, a silent ambiance free from distractions that allows one to work occasionally in a closed room for individual, concentrated work.

UNIVERSITIES

The main focus is placed on university campuses. Today such an environment needs a variety of different spaces and is an ideal scenario to replicate the atmospheres, which characterize the working world. The goals sought at campuses are those, which configure universities as a space for research, collaboration and innovation, in addition to improving the quality of the university system. The new demands placed by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) require the modernization of universities in Europe.

As opposed to traditional work and study spaces, where each space is destined to a specific purpose, the new spaces are flexible, adaptable and offer a wide variety of activities. There is no delimited individual space for each student or worker. Rather, collaboration is sought among people in communal areas equipped with the necessary tools for cognitive interchange.

A variety of factors have contributed to this transformation, such as the spaces' sustainability, cost savings, demographics, globalization, technology and changes in society.

The need for a physical communal space is something, which is also deemed essential by Alexandra den Heijer, an architect and a professor at the Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. The notion of a campus within the city is present in the refurbishment of BK City, the university's school of architecture. University spaces are integrated into those of the city, so that students and residents alike can make use of the services and amenities at any time. Meeting areas like cafeterias, libraries, activities, lectures, etc. fosters this interchange. The city provides services to the university, as does the university to the city. Consequently, the
learning environment becomes the third teacher.

Another significant university-driven initiative is that of the University of Brighton in United Kingdom. It explores the creative possibilities of spaces that can be adapted to any activity or educational need. The Creativity Centre is comprised of two halls (Leonardo and Galileo), which are equipped with basic furniture, walls, mobile separators, temperature and lighting controls, an olfactory control system, audiovisual equipment (projectors, cameras, etc.) and games like Lego or Connect Four. The halls are fully adaptable to the kinds of activities carried out in them, ranging from training sessions or courses to dance classes or theatre. This represents a new typology of flexible space.

The Hub is located within Coventry University. It is a space where students can go in their free time between classes, which was created to students’ new needs for comfort in an informal learning space that stimulates collaboration. It can hold up to 1,000 students at any one time. These workspaces are being implemented at universities to meet students’ needs. Their proximity to the professional world and to the layout of a working environment is clear and there are increasing in number at European universities.
A new kind of functional symbiosis involving socio-cultural demands is therefore emerging.

UNIVERSITY AND COMPANY COOPERATION

These types of research chairs encourage entrepreneurship among academics by developing lines of research that are related (Larrauri & Clemente, 2000), of interest to the university and also the company if they have an interest in knowledge, development and use of new teaching methodologies and their space requirements.

The students, in the fourth year of the interior design degree, made possible the collaboration activity between university and business. Specifically in the “Surveys and budgets. Direction and production. Standards” subject during the 2014/2015 academic year, taught by the professors María Jesús Triviño and Adolfo Jordan.

The proposal to design a neutral space was incorporated to the subject as a design project intended to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired in the design degree, in addition to recent realities identified during the investigation. Thus preparing students for immersion in working life and enhance the development of interdisciplinary skills such as time management, communication, responsibility, self-confidence, or other specific skills related to the profession.

The problem presented to the students proposed an interior design project within the European University of Madrid –Villaviciosa de Odon– Campus in the Building B’s neutral spaces; identified as hall lobbies in the first, second and third floors and the cafeteria. In these renovated spaces the users should be able to perform various activities, such as collaborative meetings, tutorials, and individual and team study, as well as rest and eat. The students were required to incorporate to the project Steelcase furniture designed for such spaces.

In total 6 projects were developed and three selected to be presented to Steelcase, this activity was incorporated as part of the project exercise.

The results of the dynamic of the experience (between the professionals, professors from various areas and students involved) reflect the referred to and claimed concepts, in the field of design, of “interdisciplinary” and “multidisciplinary” – in the field of design, not just a proclamation, but also certainly a reality. The interdisciplinary project undertaken faithfully reflects the daily reality of the profession. Interdisciplinary design is a fact: the distance between creativity and applied design to a market product is shrinking. All members of the team, both students and professors and collaborators, became the professional exercise, leaving behind the established roles of training and teaching, far from the organizational hierarchies and privileged positions. Continued collaboration and a common goal in a flexible and tolerant manner, ensured true teamwork, a more professional and less academic part emerged, relegating teaching procedures to professional judgment.
CONCLUSION

The constant changes undergone by society lead us to propose simple, diverse spaces (flexible and customizable) that can be adapted to each person’s needs. In conceptual terms, tablets are a good example of a device that adapts to the needs of a changing society. The experience of uniting university and business has led to the evident break with the traditional classroom space as the absolute protagonist of learning and requires expansion into other areas, transforming the new environments into living mutable elements, where exchanges and contributions of the diverse actors involved are constant.

There are therefore enough indications to firmly believe that work and educational spaces have a common future geared to flexibility. Professional environments require collaboration among employees and the introduction of more efficient, creative and environmentally responsible work models. Spaces therefore have to be in keeping with these demands. For their part, educational spaces are becoming increasingly like professional models. They must therefore also adapt to their environment. Today’s students have changed. They work and study at the same time, or stop working to go back to university. They are more mature and demand profes-
sional spaces at universities. This evolution is aimed at increasing the productivity of companies and at better preparing students to join the labour market.

When seeking a learning space that satisfies the needs of contemporary society, it is therefore necessary to attain a new balance, understood as harmony between opposing ideas: technological and analogue, complex and simple, global and local, static and dynamic, physical and virtual, etc. Balance has been a crosscutting value throughout history. The moment we are living – in the very midst of a digital and social revolution – requires more balance than ever.

Unfortunately we have as yet to see in the university campus spaces that respond to the needs of students who will be the professionals of the future, there exist few examples of projects and spaces in an academic environment of interest, much more needs to be done in order to turn this context into a reality.

REFERENCES