

# HOW TO HOLD A CONFERENCE — AND LIKE IT

*the effects of environment  
on communications in  
group meetings*

On any given day, society invests millions of dollars in conferences; thousands of conferences, on a vast array of subjects, for a wide variety of reasons. All of these meetings strive for the same basic reward: communication. Some succeed in attaining it, many achieve it only partially, and many others fail completely.

In the theater, play and actors are central. Likewise, people and ideas are the most important factors in any conference. Psychologists believe, however, that environment contributes 15 to 20 per cent of the elements influencing a conference. That much influence is worth controlling in favor of success.

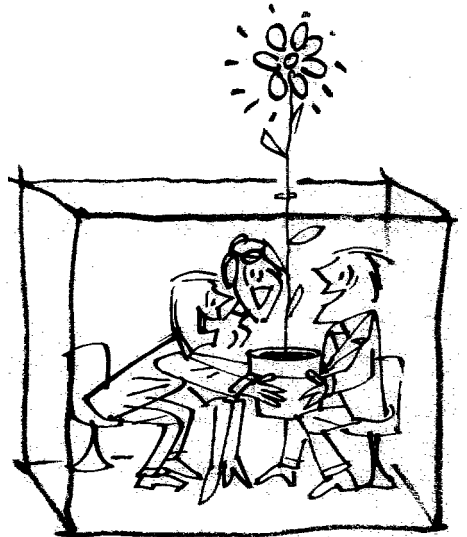
But environmental design is not a science. It is still an art. The Japanese, with great subtlety and restraint, have raised that art to the status of a cultural entity. Still, it is commonly said that the most significant exchanges between people take place on a highly personal and individual basis; in corridors, taxicabs and elevators, not in large groups imprisoned in conference rooms.

Is this an immutable phenomenon? If holding a conference requires real motivation on the part of its participants, perhaps there are times and places appropriate for conferences. The art of providing favorable environments for communication is young in our society. The comparatively artificial act of conferring demands more conscious inquiry.

Some of the basic queries are posed in this article, and a few are answered. But the overriding purpose of this article, like that of poetry, is to ask, not answer questions. To paraphrase Archibald MacLeish, a conference should not mean, but be.

## CAN A ROOM ENCOURAGE CREATIVITY?

In its most basic form, a conference is a meeting of people to serve a need. Such needs include those of information exchange, education, problem solving, social satisfaction and tradition-sharing.



*Can a room encourage  
Creativity?*

And the importance of environment varies among types of meetings.

One kind of conference structure, for example, provides for the exchange of ideas. It affords the opportunity to pursue concepts in an atmosphere of safety and security, without pressures of survival. This kind of conference screens out most immediate concerns and enables participants to explore whatever subjects they choose without forcing them to make a living, obtain food or shelter, or, indeed, protect themselves against each other. Obviously, environment plays a key role in such a conference, simply by providing a mood of security.

The art of conferring in creative environments remains in its infancy. What, for instance, are the relationships between the user and the designer? Can we merge science and art into a methodology for creating integrated, productive environmental systems? Can an environment create harmony, rather than dissension, among conferees?

## HOW DOES THE INDIVIDUAL FIT IN?

Before a conference may serve a social need, a fundamental process must take place — communication. That act — the conveying of information between or

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*How does the individual fit in?*

among intelligent beings — implies something beyond a purely factual exchange.

Man is an emotional as well as an intellectual being. He brings his unconscious as well as his conscious mind to all meetings. And his emotions are the product of a lifetime of experiences. Environment can profoundly affect the psyche.

Conference administrators have found that the attitudes an individual brings to a meeting are the most difficult obstacles they have to overcome. Many of these attitudes are nonintellectual, even irrational, and something in the conference room may trigger an unfavorable conditioned response. The color, lighting, shape, even the texture of a room may prove distracting to some and highly irritating to others.

Even the timing of a conference is important. Some conferees are day people, but others work better at night. Lengthy meetings tire most participants, but some can tolerate long periods of intense concentration.

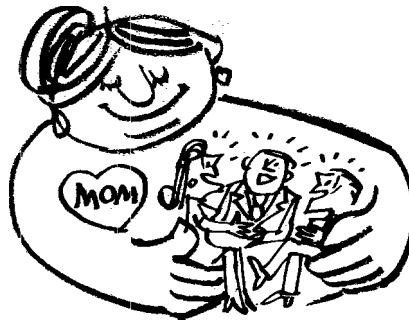
The goals, characteristics and philosophies of the people who occupy a conference environment constitute highly relevant components of its complex machinery.

Spontaneity is essential, but a certain amount of formality, at least in a

conference's initial stages, makes it easier for individuals to form productive relationships, overcome inhibitions and allay their fears of one another. But how much formality? How much helps and how much hinders? We also need to know how many conferees constitute a comfortable and productive group? And, can the data from systems analysis techniques and from the social and behavioral sciences be applied to environmental design?

#### CAN A ROOM BE HUMAN?

It is well known that a room can actually victimize its occupants. But what must a room do or be like in order to induce communication? What constitutes the best kind of conference environment?



*Can a room be human?*

One school of thought maintains that the more natural a room is (that is, the more nature one brings into it), the more restful, less distracting and more pleasant it becomes. Adherents to this school are receptive to such design concepts as a transparent forest retreat that could be made opaque at will.

Another group feels that the environment should be specifically relevant — a clinical conference room for clinical conference, a study-like room for scholarly seminars. In this way, an appropriate milieu might be created especially for every conference. Still others feel that specific environments can be inhibiting, and that it is possible to design a conference room suited to most types of meetings. In such a "neutral room," each individual might be free to create his own environment. The space might

imply a total absence of design statements, or it might involve the most intricate planning to achieve myriad stimuli.

A fourth alternate offers compromise. For example, a room may change in environment from say, a wood-paneled room with a fireplace and red leather chairs to a bare hospital operating theater, by designing various areas of concentration and by judicious use of light, color, shape and texture. Perhaps, say others, conference participants actually need two rooms: a formal, well-lit "neutral room" where everyone would sit in a circle and become acquainted with his fellow conferees, and then a more formal area where the most productive exchange would take place. There are even those who believe, as the Japanese do, that mild discomfort has its uses in an environment, just as a relative comfort seems to encourage relaxation and an easy flow of ideas.

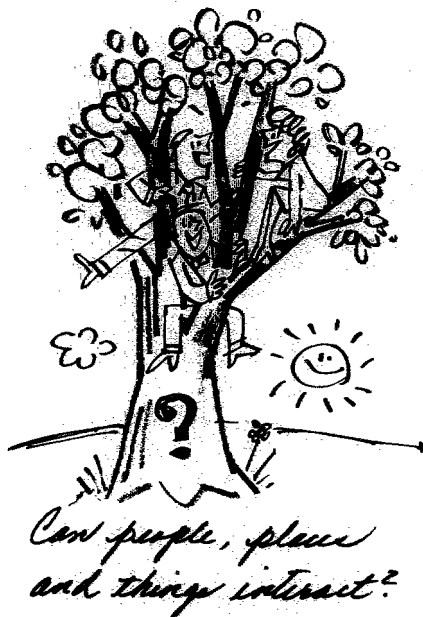
In any case, few designers seem to feel that a conference room can or should be devoid of any statements. A human approach, all agree, is essential in achieving a productive environment, and some even maintain that situation and attitude create environment, rather than the reverse.

Can man effect basic behavioral changes through environmental design? Architects believe he can. But how? And what are the causes and effects? Can environment promote or defeat important human values? Are the designer's goals and methodologies different from those of the human engineer?

#### CAN PEOPLE, PLACES AND THINGS INTERACT?

After centuries of trial and error, we know that certain specific factors are important in the interaction of environment and human behavior. The human eye, for instance is accustomed to endless change. Like the other sense organs, it is most at ease under constantly varying conditions. That is why man

cannot bear monotony. The out-of-doors, with its plants, clouds, streams and shifting light intensities, provides conditions that man has come to need and like.



Perhaps a conference environment, then, should duplicate the natural variety that ancient civilizations recognized in the elements of earth, air, fire and water. Certainly technology is advanced enough to provide what might be called a restful condition of movement.

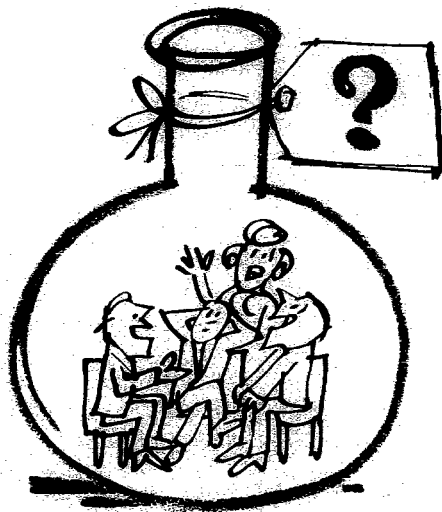
Visibility, and therefore good lighting, constitutes another pertinent factor in the design of a productive conference environment. People want to see each other clearly. And most people seem to need eye-to-eye contact. A gentle, human use of light creates a sense of harmony and appears most effective when it illuminates people, rather than the room, itself.

The size proportions of a space certainly affect its occupants. Small rooms, or rooms that lack area in which to escape — even momentarily or visually — from the main foci of activity, tend to become claustrophobic. The capability of movement from one environment to another helps eliminate oppressive feelings. Opportunities for irrelevant, innocuous movement within the environment also aid in relieving tensions.

Comfortable proximity to one's fellows is an asset, and even tactile contact may be desirable under certain circumstances, but crowding can cause adverse effects. A sense of closeness and cohesion without discomfort — the same sense of response to one's physical neighbors that occurs in the theater — contributes much to the success of a conference.

Similarly, ceiling height is important. A very low ceiling produces a sense of oppression. A high ceiling — or in the case of outdoor conferences, no ceiling at all — creates a feeling of freedom and well-being.

There seems to be little question that the physical aspects of environment affect people. But can we measure the effects of specific factors on mood, creativity and productivity? Can environment encourage openness to experience, fulfillment, mental health, love? Can the interaction between man and his environment be measured and ultimately predicted? What data are available or need to be developed regarding the ways in which people behave in group meeting situations?

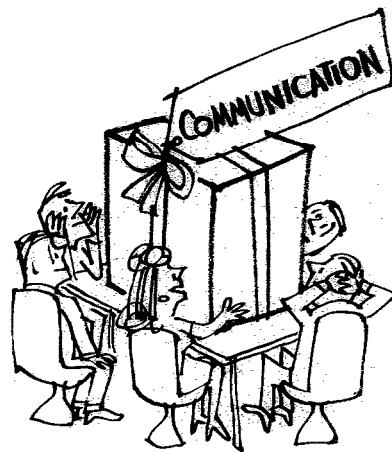


*What can be done?*

## WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Evaluation in microcosm, under conditions as closely controlled as possible, is probably the most practical approach to environmental design research. Perhaps researchers could set up a series of temporary "sound stages" in which the influence of such factors as size, shape, color, light and texture could be investigated. Simultaneously, motivational studies could be conducted, using a wide variety of conference groups.

One aspect of such a research project might be experimentation with various remote conference center environments. Three such centers could be involved: one on the West Coast, one in Chicago and one in New York. In them, the special requirements of remote audio and visual conferences could be probed, and the effects of time, place and physiological, psychological, sociological and technological factors might be examined.



*Environmental design and the interaction of human behavior.*

In any event, the aim of all such environmental studies — immediate or remote — would be creation of a space that would allow communication to take place at the very moment when optimum conditions prevail for idea-exchange.