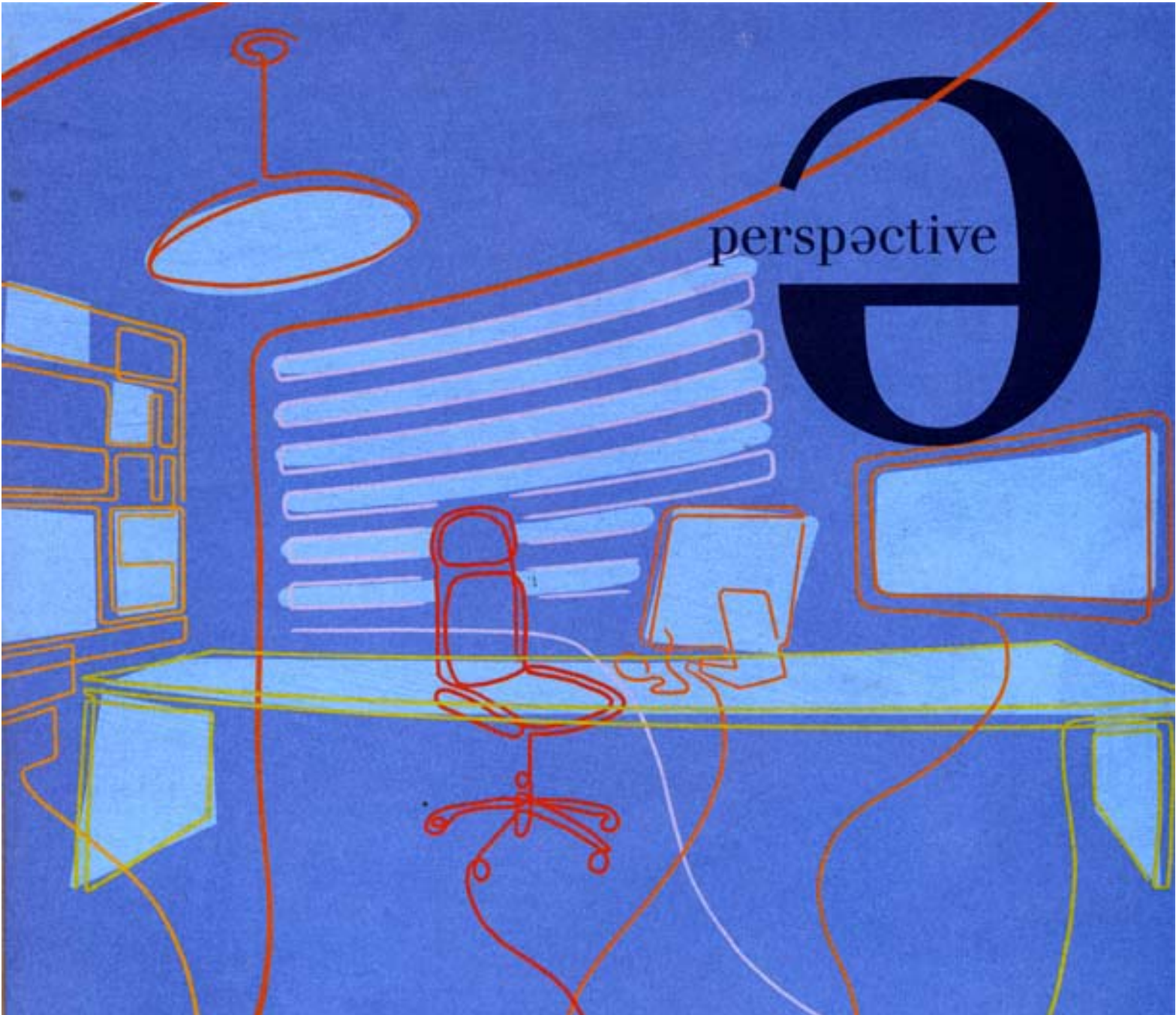


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The increasing influence of virtual technologies both reinforces our need for designed places and forever changes our experience of them.

By Jan Lakin

## RETAKING PLACE





Previous page: Visitors enter the Poetry Foundation from the garden plaza. Above: The building's theme of transparency extends to the open interconnected interior spaces.

Photography: Steve Hall ©Hedrich Blessing

For a few days this July, Twitter was abuzz about a marriage proposal that took place in a cookbook store in San Francisco. "Can't do this on Amazon," someone triumphantly tweeted, deriding the online world and its limited reality while simultaneously employing it to do so. This sentiment is part of a social-media backlash that counts Sherry Turkle, MIT professor of the social studies of science and technology, among its supporters; her book, *Alone Together*, posits that the more connected we are digitally, the more emotionally alienated we can become from each other. She's joined by science and humanity writer Jonah Lehrer, who, in his August 6, 2011, *Wall Street Journal* column, disparaged Google+, the new challenge to Facebook that "aims to make sharing on the Web more like sharing in real life." Lehrer states, "For too long, we've imagined technology as a potential substitute for our analog life" and asserts that contrary to our late 1990s enthusiasm for technology to deliver us from our physical limits, "face-to-face interaction [has] become even more valuable."

Many organizations understand this and—in spite of escalating real estate, offshoring trends, and the inexorable displacement of brick-and-mortar businesses by online



Studio O+A's renovation of Microsoft's Building 4 included a 'living wall' that brings a touch of nature into the stairwell.

Photography: Jasper Sanidad // The Rebus Project

ones—are investing in places where we can come together in person. One such example is Chicago's Poetry Foundation, which opened its first permanent location this spring. The fact that in this century it's a physical place at all is a small miracle. Even with the perilous fate of bookstores, the renegade popularity of e-books, and poetry's lack of commercial appeal, this 100-year-old organization decided to establish a place to better connect with the public and, through readings and events, increase the poetry community.

Far from presenting an elitist or academic message or from making an iconographic statement, the building, designed by local architect John Roman, conveys access and encourages participation. This begins with its skin—a black zinc screen—that surrounds the two-story building proper yet reveals what's within. Fittingly, the plan devotes its ground floor to public functions: a noncirculating library, a multipurpose space for readings, an exhibition gallery, and a 4,000-square-foot garden courtyard that leads from the street to the entrance, tantalizingly beckoning passersby to come in and explore. Once in the courtyard, visitors see through a glass wall to the double-height library filled



AOL's fluid headquarters design allows employees to work throughout the space, with whiteboard walls capturing inspirational moments.

Photography: Jasper Sanidad // The Rebus Project

with shelves of poetry, like a beacon guiding them to the literature. Clear glazed interior walls visually link the public spaces, establishing an inviting communal place.

In the office arena, designing spaces to foster community and collaboration has been a mantra for a while, but their exigency seems more legitimate and urgent than ever. "With shrinking workplaces and more mobile workers, there's an increasing need for designs that help people connect and have face-to-face collaboration," says Felice L. Silverman, IIDA, president of Silverman Trykowski Associates. Ironically, technologically versed companies seem quite cognizant of this. Microsoft recently converted an office building expressly to provide a communal place for its dispersed—but digitally linked—Redmond, Washington, campus of approximately 35,000 employees. San Francisco-based Studio O+A, which counts Facebook and Yelp among its clients, transformed the interiors of the campus's Building 4 from traditional single-person offices into a drop-in meeting place-cum-workshop. The goal is to instill grassroots innovation by enabling coworkers with complementary interests and skills to share ideas and potentially work together.

Building 4 offers a place and equipment for after-hours project tinkering, rooms for small groups to collaborate on long-term projects, a conference area dubbed "The Garage"—in reference to how legendary technology pioneers got their start and to the literal garage doors that roll up to create a larger space—and a cafeteria that does double-duty as a town-hall meeting room. Microsoft's in-house design lead John Snaveley reports that Building 4 has become hugely popular: "We have squatters from all over the campus." It may sound reminiscent of the late '90s rage for "innovation labs," but Microsoft's version eschews any high-minded "blue-sky" agenda for a distinctly roll-up-your-sleeves space.

This valuation of physical place for interaction isn't merely a regressive or nostalgic trend. Nor is it a matter of either/or, with analog or digital space trumping the other. Rather, these boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. "Today, if you perceive a sharp distinction between real and virtual space, you are definitely an old consumer," says Lance Boge, an independent New York consultant specializing in what he calls "user-experience retail design." He adds: "Talk to your kids; most likely they experience both as one fluid space."



Studio O+A principal Primo Orpilla, Associate IIDA, would agree. He calls the contemporary office a "free-range work environment." In addition to Microsoft's Building 4, the firm also recently completed AOL's new headquarters, which supports a variety of work, collaboration, and meeting options, all of which flow into each other in an open plan.

Not surprisingly, the conference rooms are equipped with the latest in video-conferencing technology and electronic whiteboards. But whiteboard surfaces are found along the public hallways too, since, "You could be walking to the lunchroom when you have an innovative thought or conversation, so you scribble on the whiteboard wall, then take a picture of it with your phone," notes Orpilla.

The melding of online and offline, and the resulting notion that work can occur across a spectrum of places, is reshaping education design too. With Wi-Fi permeating campus spaces, education and study are no longer limited to libraries and classrooms. Herman Miller conducted a survey in February 2011 on active communal places, such as cafés and lounges, where learning and social activities integral to learning are happening. Survey input from education planners and designers on the features of these small-group spaces, termed "hubs" by the company, revealed: Collaboration is the main driver of hub zones; flexibility of furnishings is a primary requirement; and a majority feels hubs should be designed for less than 10 people. Herman Miller concludes, "These deliberately crafted indoor collaborative spaces are emerging as key learning centers on 21st-century campuses across the country."

A flexible mixture of work, play, and socializing is fueling hospitality design as well. Art Gensler, FIDA, FAIA, Gensler's founder, notes, "A hotel lobby used to be just the reception and concierge desks. Now it's a social hub, with internet, food, and drinks at any time." Restaurants are inherently social places, but the design of Tashan, a new Indian tapas restaurant in Philadelphia, emphasizes flexibility and variety in a way reflective of larger trends.

"What's really important in restaurant design now is there's not one huge monumental space. Instead you have various highly-specific created atmospheres so people can find their own kind of space," says Winka Dubbeldam, principal of New York-based Archi-Tectonics, which designed Tashan.

So while an open kitchen is a key attraction, Archi-Tectonics created a range of areas, all obliquely connected, as well as employed rich textures and custom-crafted furnishings, in anticipation of different customer temperaments.

Perforated wood screens gently delineate the lounge. A higher ceiling defines the main dining room, but perimeter booths upholstered in black leather temper the airiness, instilling mystery and intimacy. Adjacent to the kitchen, a 24-foot-long communal table surrounded by a mix of seating

## "THE DIFFERENT ZONES INSTIGATE DIFFERENT SPEEDS OF BEING THERE."

—Winka Dubbeldam, principal, Archi-Tectonics



Tashan's communal table, informally situated next to the open kitchen, seats different-size groups together. Photography: Don Pearson Photographers



The private dining room can be an extension of the main space or more intimate with its padded-leather doors closed.



Making the cultural circuit this summer in New York, a UniQlo Cube partnered with a temporary skating rink near the High Line.

Image: Courtesy of HWKN [HollwichKushner]

satisfies the social impulse. Padded leather doors close off the private dining room where "it's more intimate and calm, as if you've trespassed into someone's wine cellar," Dubbeldam says. "The different zones instigate different speeds of being there," she continues.

The space is also designed to evolve, with screens that move and wall-height doors that pivot to transform the private dining room into an adjacent space "so that over time or even a day you can adjust the space to how you want," Dubbeldam says.

While Tashan is devoid of any technological bells and whistles, one may wonder if its mutable space is reflective of our online culture. Does the Internet's 24/7 availability and its perpetual updates influence how we expect our restaurants and other designed spaces to accommodate us? Boqe speculates we may be at the beginning of a paradigm shift in our perception of space—a sort of 21st-century version of the Renaissance's orientation around the vanishing point—that will only be recognizable years from now. Still, right now it's impossible to parse what impact technology specifically has on how we design

spaces and what we desire from them. Until we sort out cause and effect and the innumerable forces that shape how we design, it's clear there are some shared trends: accessibility, community, and connectivity; variable options and flexibility; continual evolution; and a user-focused sensibility.

All these drivers are behind a resurgence of temporary and experimental retail spaces. White pop-up stores have been the rage for a while, companies such as Japanese clothing retailer Uniqlo are creating such places with greater emphasis on cultural and local relevance. In a temporary public lot adjacent to New York's exceptionally successful High Line park, Uniqlo was a sponsor of a roller skating rink and its adjoining outdoor food and drink plaza for the summer of 2011. Also on the lot was the UniQlo Cube, a 64-square-foot pop-up store designed by HWKN [HollwichKushner], a New York-based branding and architecture firm. Six of these cubes traveled throughout the city this fall, notably to arts and cultural festivals. It's a brand campaign that moves pop-ups from pure retail exposure to lifestyle participation.



State Farm's Next Door space also uses location and cultural touchpoints to reach a key demographic: 18- to 35-year-olds, who face major life junctures yet tend to be hesitant financial planners. Developed collaboratively with IDEO over a four-year research process, Next Door offers a public café, free classes and events hosted by "local experts" (such as BYO-mat yoga classes, a running club, and Bears's games screenings catered by Trader Joe's), a community center available for use at no charge, and, not least, financial coaching.

Brett Myers, program director of Next Door, says its Lincoln Park location was selected for both its relevant population and its "hyper-local neighborhood with many small businesses, restaurants, and cafés" that would enable them to integrate with the community. IDEO's 3,500-square-foot design fastidiously observes and reflects its surroundings with a modern yet rough-hewn look. Tall oak-framed glass doors span the storefront in the style of nearby establishments. The exposed wood-truss ceiling is authentically local, as is the newly uncovered brick wall behind the café bar. Seating options from long tables and benches of wood reclaimed from Chicago buildings, casual couches, and café seating all speak the neighborhood vernacular. Even the magazine selection and local coffee provider are studiously representative of the environs.

To inform the design, the IDEO and State Farm research included consumer testing at a full-size prototype. Since this reluctant population preferred one-on-one conversations

to classes for financial coaching, IDEO conceived of the "coaching pods," open boxes on wheels that offer both privacy and informality. iPads tended to win out over laptops as a coaching tool since they tested as a more neutral, mutual territory. In fact, according to Myers, feedback led to the reduction of technology, with consumers reporting, "I carry my own technology now." But Myers also notes that consumer input was used to weigh design decisions not eliminate them. For example, testing resulted in an old-fashioned low-tech chalkboard as a community calendar, yet to sign-up for the events there's a computer kiosk. "Analog sort of won out in the physical design, but we still have that virtual complement," says Myers.

What's the value of this one storefront space in a low-density neighborhood to a huge corporation such as State Farm? For Myers, most notably, it's the enduring impact of a permanent place "with long interactions allowing you to treat people in a way that's consistent with your brand, whereas online is so quick to change." He adds, "As much as your information is always out there, it's also 10th on the list in a matter of seconds."

IDEO's locally-focused design for Next Door includes exposing and restoring original structural elements and using reclaimed wood for furnishings.

Photography: Courtesy of State Farm



In this photo-simulation of a prototype desk by Microsoft's Envisioning Lab, hardware and software are seamless.

Photography: Courtesy Microsoft

## "YOU NEED TO MAKE SPACE ADJUSTABLE AND BE WILLING TO BREAK FROM ESTABLISHED MODELS..."

—Felice L. Silverman, IIDA, president, Silverman Trykowski Associates

In one sense, Next Door does change, since it's designed to be highly flexible. "Every time I go there it looks a little different depending on the event that day," says Elizabeth Spenko, content guide at IDEO. And while State Farm hopes Next Door will be a fixture in the community, they will continue to evolve the space given ongoing feedback from customers.

Not too long ago, an open-ended design was a radical notion. Today, as technology forever mutates from old version to new, our designed spaces must allow for inevitable change. In health-care design, Silverman is focused on anticipating next generation media, such as doctors' increasing use of electronic records, laptops, and iPads. "You need to make space adjustable and be willing to break from established models, since new technologies will inevitably change room configurations and impact space planning," she says.

Back at Microsoft, Snaveley is exploring this future unknown territory where technology and designed space will increasingly merge. For the company's Envisioning Lab, he leads

the group developing prototypes for the future office, investigating the potential of "natural user interfaces" such as voice, gesture, and touch commands. One project at very initial stages of development is an interactive desk-office space with horizontal and vertical multitouch surfaces and displays, eliminating the need for hardware, pen, and paper.

It's important to note that Snaveley's philosophy is to begin design with the human need (as with AOL's whiteboard walls), not with the technical application and its capabilities. This focus might help us think twice about how technology, if not well designed and thoughtfully integrated into physical places, can undermine its potential to connect us, ultimately negating what makes places unique and irreplaceable. □