

COLOR, INTERIORS AND OFFICE FURNITURE

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In this article, four recent projects completed by Christopher Alexander and his colleagues at the Center for Environmental Structure

1. MAIN ROOM OF POTASH/MCCABE HOUSE

with Mark Briner, Chester..., Stephen Duff, Kleoniki Tsotroupoulou.

2. PLASTERED INTERIOR OF GREAT HALL, JAPAN

with Hajo Neis, Mr Ishiguro.

3. A NEW SYSTEM OF OFFICE FURNITURE

with Artemis Anninou, Gary Black, Mark Briner, Eleni Coromvli,

4. MAIN PLAZA OF MOUNTAIN VIEW CIVIC CENTER

with Hajo Neis, Artemis Anninou, Ingrid King, Eleni Coromlvi, I-Jong Chin.

PREAMBLE

All four of these projects demonstrate a new sensibility, in the interation of color and light, together with an ordinary human sweetness which is almost entirely missing from the works of this century.

The projects vary greatly in scale.

One is a hand-painted kitchen.

One is the interior of a large auditorium, itself the center piece of a twelve million dollar campus recently built in Japan, and still continuing construction.

One is a new system of office furniture, currently being negotiated with a major manufacturer in the midwest.

One is an urban space, designed as part of an invited entry in a recent competition for a new civic center in Mountain View, California. Even this last urban space, though technically not an interior, uses the attitudes and sensibilities of interior architecture in addressing the problem of a public place.

All of these projects confront a single problem.

This problem is easy to grasp at a small scale, but much harder to deal with at a larger scale. Nevertheless, it is at the large scale embodied in the auditorium design, and in the new system of office furniture, that the significance of the problem and its solution, reach their most important level.

THE GENERAL PROBLEM

The fundamental problem being confronted in these works, is the same in all four cases.

What is the nature of an environment, where a person feels the weight of his own heart: the sweetness of his own existence: the sweetness of the world; and the comfort of real life, the life of the heart, as opposed to the mass-existence and manipulated efficiency of modern and post-modern architecture.

This means that, when made, you want to be there. You really want to be there, in the same sense that you want to be in a corner with a pillow on a Saturday afternoon, or in the shirtsleeve atmosphere of your own workshop.

We have thus tried to make a kind of place, where the environment created causes a deep feeling of comfort and harmony in the person who is there. Especially, in the office furniture, this represents an enormous challenge, since present manufacturing, responsible for a huge part of the environment which people spend their lives in, have not even begun to address this problem. So far, the problem which has been addressed, is either the problem of efficiency (as in the action office and its successors), or the problem of image (as in the present lines of furniture produced by Sunnar Houserman etc).

No manufacturer of office furniture has yet addressed the problem of the genuine comfort and well being of the workers.

In a recent series of discussions, we found out that Haworth (with a policy brought in by recent middle management from other industries) explicitly rejects the comfort of the workers, in favor of the opinion and comfort of the man who buys the furniture.

1. MAIN ROOM OF POTASH/MCCABE HOUSE

This room is part of a house we are building for Dan Potash and Maureen McCabe, a young couple who have one son.

SHOTS OF THE INTERIOR

The room is kitchen, living room, hearth, alcove. It is the main room of the house, which looks out to the south across a small paved garden.

The room is mainly defined by its windows, low ceiling, and built in furniture, and the table. We designed and built all of this.

Perhaps most significant of all, is the color of the room.

Very early on, I asked Dan and Reenie if they wanted to have color there. They had liked the floor in our office very much, and asked us to make a terrazo marble floor, of a similar kind.

After experiments with paper I found out that the light in the room, seemed to need green, and red and yellow -- most green, then red, then yellow -- in amounts.

I invented a pattern which had the right proportions of these colors, and we made the floor.

SUN SHINING ON THE FLOOR

When we had built most of the furniture, we came to the room. I had always assumed the room would be mainly yellow; so had Reenie.

The color is not bright, or garish. The amazing thing is that even though the room has these five colors on the walls, in an arrangement which many people would consider wild, in reality it is more calm than any other coloring that I was able to find.

The light of the room needs just these colors, in just this arrangement.

FIVE COLORS WHICH I FIRST STAPLED TO THE WALL

The apparently wild color, which is really very subdued in its harmonies, came about because at each moment I was placing the paper in a way which was most calm, and most alive, most full of life, but most subdued, and most quiet.

PAPER MOCKUPS ON THE WALL

KITCHEN TABLE

THE DOLPHINS ABOVE THE SETTLE

2. PLASTERED INTERIOR OF GREAT HALL, JAPAN

JAPANESE PHOTOGRAPH

RUTHS PHOTOS

PHOTO OF MOCKUP IN PROGRESS

GREAT HALL INTERIOR BEFORE PLASTERING

3. A NEW SYSTEM OF OFFICE FURNITURE

The most complex and difficult of these projects, which is still under way, is a system of office furniture we have been developing.

We have tried to define a complete system of furniture, that would satisfy people, in the work place, in a way which is entirely unfamiliar from today's technocratic environment. We posed the question: what would the office be like, if people felt as comfortable while they are working, as they do in their own homes.

The system which we currently have under development, has these following key features:

1. It has a system of about fifty components.
2. Most of these components are designed to be manufactured in a wide range of dimensions.
3. We have a layout process which enables groups of workers to lay out the larger format of their environment for workspace groups.
4. We have a second layout process which enables an individual worker to lay out his own workspace, within the group layout, according to his own needs.
5. Both layout processes are available on a computer disc, so that people can do it simply, quickly and efficiently, both individually and in groups.

The furniture itself is entirely different from the furniture systems in current use.

It is made of simpler materials, made with greater feeling, and with a variety of materials which emphasise human use and comfort.

For example:

A pin board, with wooden frame, and Japanese silk cover.

PIN BOARD

A desk, laminated plywood, red enamelled surface, soft linoleum work surface.

DESK

A work sofa, of height compatible with desk and table worksurfaces, plywood frame, with metal lath upholstery supports, foam and heavy swale dark blue corduroy upholstery.

SOFA

A small rolling work table, black shining plastic surface for easy cleaning, with brass fixtures, and heavy brass castors.

ROLLING TABLE

Table with varnished wood, and green inset formica work surface.

GREEN TOPPED TABLE

White enamelled thick walls, which come in a variety of combinations for shelves, closets, drawers, and waist high counter.

THICK WALLS

High desk. Shelves and pigeon holes, sloping surface, red lacquered wood, brown leather inserted writing surface.

RED LACQUERED DESK

Sliding screens, red watered silk, over wood frames.

SLIDING CREENS

Floors, in pine blocks, variety of patterns.

PINE BLOCK FLOORS

Curtains, and curtain tie ribbons, deep red corduroy.

CURTAINS

Light weight arm-chair in grey fiber graphite, arms, and cushions, made in a variety of shapes and sizes, on the basis of a simple fitting machine that allows each person to be measured for his own chair.

ARMCHAIR

Wall light: metal, and frosted glass, with cutouts, and indirect light.

WALL LIGHTS

After preliminary field testing, we have found that these items provide an entirely new level of comfort and convenience.

The main thing is that they provide genuine emotional dignity. Your work is not an aggressive money-making interlude in the middle of the day, but a part of your life. The feeling you have, when you work in the environment created by this material, is that you are free to work.

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We have also found that the layout process, and the layouts produced, are more fulfilling, and much more profound than the layouts which can be produced by conventional methods.

PLAN OF SWEET-POTATOES LAYOUT

SECTION

ISOMETRIC

As we see we have a great variety of space: the space is more personal than normal office layout, both in the group structure, and in the individual structure.

In order to make this layout process succeed, it is essential that the layout process be a process of differentiation. This is entirely different from the mechanical "modular" layout processes which can easily be realised in AUTOCAD, or other systems.

The organic, and lively feeling, comes about because the process lays out the large structure, and then creates the smaller differentiations, within the larger structure.

It is the process of differentiation which is necessary to obtain the kind of feeling represented here.

Knowing how to make a furniture system which has these attributes, is the main trick behind the whole idea of this process.

PLAN OF LARGE OFFICE

PHOTO OF SIMULATED MODIFIED OFFICE

4. MAIN PLAZA OF MOUNTAIN VIEW CIVIC CENTER

The elevations, and this single colored gouache painting, convey the sense of this place.

ELEVATIONS

SECTIONS

PAINTING

It is a courtyard, for a very hot climate, with wide arcades.

The main buildings are concrete, with green terrazo marble surfaces, trowelled on, and finished wet.

Inside the courtyard, the walls are yellow plaster, with terracotta above first floor, and blue horses set into the terracotta.

The blue horses are bas-relief ceramic horses, which we intended to make in our workshops. Each horse is about nine feet long.

Every column has a small fountain and a seat. The trickle of water, in the very hot climate, is enormously important, both in sound, and cool feeling.

The ground surface, is lightly dished, and in the surface is a network of square of grass, interlaced with stone paths between the grass. This gives a specially American feeling, which is both formal and informal, allows people to sit down almost anywhere, maintains a cool feeling in the tremendous heat.

Once again, the feeling of the place, is the main thing. It is a place where people would want to stay. It has a level of human comfort, not achieved, in recent times.

This is due, in large part, to the emotional use of color. But it comes also, from the painstaking detail, in every aspect of the design, which makes it work and comfortable, in its tiniest details.

SUMMARY

All these projects show a new sensibility, and a new effort to make things which are more childish, more fundamentally rooted in human feelings, and better and more comfortable as environments.

We believe these environments are more truthful emotionally, than most current environments. They deal more honestly with what it is to be a person, and with the inner emotional realities of life, day-to-day, and hour by hour. We have found that people are moved in these places, and feel more genuine levels of comfort than they are used to.

For example, during the process of making the living room for the Potash McCabe, Dan asked me one day: "Is it really alright to have this much fun. He is a banker. For him, the possibility that an environment could create such a joyful feeling, and be normal and accepted, was amazing, and lay totally outside his expectations.

In finishing, we print the following memorandum, prepared to describe one aspect of our office furniture.

If we decide to make a system which is truly responsive to the needs of users, then the individual items of furniture will have to have a special character, which is not clearly predicted by any other thing.

We take it for granted that people should be able to imagine the workplace they want, and that the "system" is then capable of responding to and implementing the workplace they have imagined.

If we take this requirement seriously, it places a demand on the system, which is rather unusual.

It may be explained as follows.

When a person forms a picture in his mind, of his ideal workplace, this picture will always be made up of elements which we may call "archetypal". For example, if a person visualised a desk, the desk he visualises will tend to be an archetypal desk -- a desk which is full of deskness. This puts it in a childish way. However, the psychological requirement is real.

If the desk which is actually available in the system is a flat plate, hung off a partition, then this thing will never correspond to the thing the person imagines, when he imagines his ideal desk.

Thus, already at this moment, the system, and the person imagining ideal workspace for himself, have parted company.

If the system is to keep company with the user, and satisfy the user deeply, then it must also be made of elements which correspond to this dreamlike and archetypal simplicity -- of the images which a person has inside his mind.

One objection that may be raised immediately, is that the images a person carries in his mind are variable, and change with style from decade to decade. According to this view, the fact that a person has an image of an so-called archetypal desk, is just a throwback to the nineteenth century (or some other time), and as soon as people "catch up" with 1980, they will begin to have an image of a flat worksurface cantilevered off a partition.

It is precisely this assumption which is fundamentally untrue.

Research in images and archetypes, makes it rather clear that these "modern" idioms just do not slowly replace the old ones. They never do.

For example, in one famous experiment, children who grew up in apartment houses in France, and who had spent their whole lives in the environment of apartment houses with flat roofs, still drew a small house, with pitched roof and chimney, as the archetypal house of their dreams.

The problem with the desk is similar.

When we speak of an archetypal desk, it does not mean a desk which physically resembles or imitates an old desk. It is simply true that some things have the recognisable and fundamental character of a desk, and allow people to form a relation of the kind which they would like to form with "their" desk.

The desks which we have proposed as part of the office furniture system have this character. One has a sloping top, and a back with many pigeon holes. The other is flat, almost like a table, with shallow drawers.

Thus they are quite different. But both of them have the archetypal character under discussion here. Whenever people see these desks -- to either one of them, they say "I have always wanted a desk like that".

This is what we mean by the archetypal character. It is a thing (X) which evokes the response "I have always wanted an X like that".

In the system we have proposed every single element has this archetypal character.

Thus, even a simple low bookshelf or storage cabinet, can be made like this.

The archetypal character, means not only that it corresponds to some image in the users mind -- some very ancient image. It also means that the thing has a fundamental practical character which almost cannot be improved upon.

For example, let us consider the low bookshelf with drawers. It has a flat top, with an elevated surround, that allows things to be there, without falling off behind or to the sides. The wide open shelves allow for a great variety of papers, books, packages, without any unnecessary complexity. The three drawers provide space for a few things that need to be put away, in a less dusty or less vulnerable place.

Altogether, this a fundamental, and practical object. If you have one in your workplace, it makes you feel comfortable, and solid in yourself. The comfort is much more than skin deep. It is a fundamental comfort, which comes from the fact that you have something basic, solid, and practical around you. An ordinary workhorse. You can rely on it. There is nothing to go wrong. And it makes you feel comfortable, not only because it is so practical in the obvious sense, but because it also reminds you of the best and most uncomplicated part of yourself. It takes you back to your roots.

We believe that all the items in the new furniture system must have this character.

It is not hard to see that this "archetypal" character is absolutely part and parcel of the user layout process.

If we want a person to feel free to imagine a simple and practical workenvironment for himself, then he will, most naturally, build up his mental picture from archetypal elements or objects.

If the elements in the system all have this archetypal character, then the system will perfectly fit his mood when he tries to define his own workplace. As a result, any minor technical inconveniences or hitches that develop during the process, will seem genuinely minor, because the essentials have been satisfied.

On the other hand, a system which tries to satisfy a user layout process, but which fails to have this archetypal character, will very easily irritate the user. If the slightest thing goes wrong, the errors will be annoying, and ultimately not solvable, because the system's elements do not have this fundamental archetypal relationship to his person. If the system does not satisfy him at this essential level, then the details are unimportant. It will never really quite seem right.

Thus, the elements with the basic practical and archetypal character, are absolutely essential to a successful user layout process.