

ARCHITECTURE AS A PLACE TO FLOURISH

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Advancing Practice with the Generative Space Award

Imagine the practice of architecture being expanded to include not only the design of the physical environment but also the design of the social environment. Such an expansion is not as radical as it might initially appear, when you consider that the social environment is always being conditioned by the physical environment anyway. So, why not become more inclusive in our practice and take a larger professional leadership role by actually designing the social space, too?

This advanced practice offers the advantages of being better able to design a more fully integrated experience for those who interact with the spaces. More importantly, it offers the opportunity for architecture to be more impactful in its ability to inform outcomes—which, of course, is really what matters most to our clients. Clients in today's world, generally, commission "architecture" as a functional, deterministic intervention to enable certain specified outcomes to be achieved, for example: maximizing allowable dwelling units per acre, optimizing the revenues of a restaurant or retail establishment, conveying a desired image, or even enhancing the ability of children to learn.

The emerging theory of “generative space” design is transcending this functional imperative, through a learning process of practicing “health design leadership” and the aspiration of creating “a place to flourish.” This new research-based learning process informs a more wholly integrated professional practice that both systemically and sustainably improves what the architecture was put in service to facilitate.

Background

The theory of generative space, as it relates to architectural practice, was developed through the research, practice, and testing of a method that could be easily replicated to improve lives through the design of the environment. The evolution of this theory has taken three significant iterations of large-scale experimentation, spanning forty years of development, to arrive at the robust method currently being practiced.

Generative space practitioners have been participating in the “Leading by Design” research project for the past nine years, under the auspices of the not-for-profit The CARITAS Project. Today, there are twelve participants and their respective organizations in five countries, representing a diverse stakeholder group within the health and healthcare industries to field-test this new method in real-time, high-stakes applications.

Three years ago, the Generative Space Award was introduced as a means to: (1) build a knowledge base about generative space and its applications; (2) identify and recognize exemplary projects that provide community-wide learning opportunities; (3) raise awareness of this new method of practice and the benefits that it affords; and (4) bring generative space design into mainstream professional practice as a new paradigm.

A Place to Flourish

The healthcare sector has been the testing ground for the development of this new method of practice. A healthcare setting, by its very nature, should be a place for all of its related stakeholders to flourish. Has this been your experience? Sometimes, a healthcare provider—or even an entire organization—manages to provide a delightful experience, but is it sustained over time, and is it systemic throughout the organization?

The ultimate challenge is to design a place for every single individual who interacts with it: that enables an experience of vitality and flourishing so palpable that individuals recognize the quality of this experience and can express its impact upon them in their own words; a place the impact of which is so powerful and which regularly touches the lives of so many individuals that

it also improves the performance of the provider organization. The natural consequence of succeeding in this challenge is that the organization, in turn, becomes so effective in its community engagement that the overall community well-being is improved, as well.

Generative Space

“Generative space” is defined as:

. . . a place—both physical and social—where the experience of the participants in that place is one that both fulfills the functional requirements of that place and also materially improves the health, healthcare, and/or quality of life for those participating in that experience in a manner that they can each articulate in their own terms.

Additionally, and by its very nature, a generative space is a place that progressively and tangibly improves over time.

The purpose of cultivating generative space is to improve performance effectiveness.

Depending upon the interests of the particular individual, the organization, or the community, the measurements of effectiveness will vary. However, in all cases, whatever these measures are, they will be used to encourage, support, and reinforce increasing performance effectiveness in health, healthcare, and/or quality of life.

The goal of understanding how to cultivate generative space is to be able to produce it consistently, reliably, and predictably across the full range of life’s contextual situations, including our personal lives; our professional and organizational work; and throughout the vast spectrum of our community engagements.

Health Design Leadership

Each participant in the Leading by Design project learns to “actively exercise health design leadership” through the practice of experiential learning. The specific learning methodology of Leading by Design is known as “action research,” and it is linked to an integral reflexive practice, based on a case study format. In less technical terms, this means that each individual learns to learn from their personal experience as the source of their knowledge.

The reflexive practice is a discipline of reviewing personal experience to find insights that enable improvements to be made. Each Leading by Design participant is an individual case study, and

they each document their iterative learning journey as they reflect on experience, gain insight, make improvements, reflect, gain further insight, improve more, etc.

“Leadership,” as the term is used in this context, is first about personal leadership—the individual quest to continually improve ourselves, our relations, and the contextual environments that frame our experiences—by each individual actively exercising personal leadership. This specific practice of leadership is qualified by the term “health design” for two reasons: first, because it is about improving lives (health); and, second, because it requires the design of the interaction between individuals and space for the improvement to be made.

Leading by Design

The Leading by Design research project is the second phase of dedicated research to develop and test a new and replicable method that materially improves lives through design of the environment. The first phase of the research consisted of a five-year pilot study funded by the UK government, involving eighteen participants relating to a National Health Service (NHS) local health center. This pilot study enabled the concept and themes of generative space design to be identified and tested at a small, in-depth scale.

The Leading by Design research project was launched nine years ago, in the fourth year of the pilot study, to apply the generative space concepts and themes in larger and more diverse settings. Since most healthcare-related projects take several years from inception until they are in use, the findings of applying the generative space theory to actual projects are now becoming available and demonstrate that is quite dramatic in its ability to encourage and support improvements that are both systemic and sustainable.

The Generative Space Award

Any health-related or healthcare setting in the world is eligible to be submitted for the annual Generative Space Award. The award is available for projects that have been built and have been in use long enough so that the performance results can be documented as evidence of lives, organizations, and the community being improved through the design of the environment.

The award is presented in the fall of each year at the Healthcare Facilities Symposium and Expo, in Chicago. The award recipient receives a series of benefits, including the opportunity to present their project in the Generative Space Track as one of the concurrent professional presentations. The recipient also has the opportunity for their project to be featured in a leading industry journal.

How Can I Learn More About Generative Space?

The AIACC website will be posting a series of articles by 'generative space practitioners' and their specific projects; this article is the first in that series. More information about the Generative Space Award is available on www.aplacetoflourish.net and a one-day workshop on generative space will be presented on 1 October 2012, as a Pre-Conference Workshop in the Healthcare Facilities Symposium and Expo—see www.hcarefacilities.com/generativespace.asp.