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Interview with Wayne Ruga on Success with Generative Space Design

Generative space design is a way of thinking. Its practitioners focus relentlessly on the needs of commissioning clients and the ultimate users of spaces being developed. Generative space design has been shown to enhance the welfare of clients, space users, and the local community, as well as designers; so design professionals are increasingly interested in learning more about it.

Research Design Connections recently interviewed Wayne Ruga, PhD, to learn more about generative space design. Wayne has spent 40 years transforming generative space design from a nice idea to a respected design practice in at least six different countries. He founded The Center for Health Design, The Health Facilities Symposium and Expo (originally The Symposium on Healthcare Design), and [The CARITAS Project](#). Wayne is also a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and the International Interior Design Association, an honorary fellow of the American Society of Interior Designers, and a Loeb fellow of Advanced Environmental Studies at Harvard University in the Graduate School of Design.

Although some of generative space design's highest profile applications have been the design of healthcare facilities, it has been used effectively to design other sorts of places as well as products. Generative space practitioners have documented successes including the programming, design, and construction of a home in which residents flourish and the development of a healthcare facility that increased community involvement with the healthcare group as well as bonds among community members attending non-healthcare related sessions in the facility's meeting rooms.

Another example: generative space design facilitated the organizational integration and relocation of three separate government functions into a single building, and the design of that structure. Ruga has found that "the design of the environment can be done in such a way as to improve lives, organizational and professional performance, and community well-being in all settings—education, retail, hospitality, housing, urban design."

Ruga reports that people using generative space design in practice have found that it positively differentiates them from their competitors, counters commodification forces in their industries, increases revenue, and intensifies bonds with clients (which leads regularly to additional future work). The links between clients and generative space designers are strengthened by the positive ramifications for the clients' own careers of these partnership—when they are associated with projects that enhance the competitive positions of their employers, their own positions in their firms are elevated.

Many of the positive repercussions of generative space design flow from its practitioners' attention to user "needs" at multiple levels of scale—individual concerns related to psychological and physical wellbeing and similar issues at the group, community and society wide levels. Information garnered about user concerns is used to develop design options that build individual strengths and collective capabilities. A fundamental tenet of the generative space design mindset is that as a structure or product continues to exist over time, it should continuously improve user experience.

Generative space design isn't locked into a set of research methodologies and evaluative measures. It selects among the full range of qualitative and quantitative tools available and hones measurements to reflect client objectives for a project. Sometimes that means measuring increases in sales, sometimes employee turnover, sometimes a family's evaluation of a relative's end-of-life experiences in a hospice. Measuring outcomes is not an option for generative space designers; data collection and analysis is a fundamental requirement of generative space design.

Case studies on The CARITAS website indicate how much tools and techniques used on projects can vary, although information is always actively collected from users and planning does not rely on preconceived notions of project requirements. Data may be gathered using focused observation, interviewing, surveying, or some other methodology. Wayne often works with people new to generative space design to strengthen their user-focused research capabilities, particularly through the Leading by Design program, although materials freely available on the site also teach important concepts.

During our interview, Dr. Ruga detailed how generative space design puts designers into the leadership role. They take responsibility for initially sizing up a situation and determining how true client and user needs can best be identified and direct progress toward satisfying the project objectives. Ruga has learned that designers find this sort of active, engaged project role invigorating and rewarding.

Generative space design is inherently sustainable, because it develops places and objects that meet user needs over time, particularly as spaces continue to evolve to even more closely mesh with user needs. Similarly, it is biophilic because it recognizes users' most fundamental physical and psychological needs. Its data gathering and



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measurement focus are consistent with evidence-based design.

Wayne talks a lot about “places to flourish” and that phrase reflects his approach to design. He is committed to design that can and should make a difference in people’s lives. Wayne is leading teams around the world who are diving deep and to determine what user needs truly are and how they can really be satisfied.

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