

Praxis Footstep One: Crossing the river of fear

Chris Dabbs says that his talk at Praxis One, in keeping with the whole event, focuses on how to overcome professional fear of thinking 'outside the box'.

All great journeys encounter obstacles along the way, and success lies in learning how to cope with them. Increasingly, environments are expected to be not only practical but also to embody human dignity and promote health. Evidence suggests that enabling people to have greater self-control will help achieve both aims.

All those who design and manage environments frequently encounter and overcome obstacles. The reality is that we are often faced with immovable barriers when we cannot stop. The question is how to decide whether to go back, over, under or

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around them. Each of us may choose different paths that reflect our own beliefs and character. The most creative and effective solutions come from those who are most aware of their own fears and the assets they possess to deal with them.

England's most prominent architect, Christopher Wren, had his favourite design for St Paul's Cathedral – the Great Model of 1673 – rejected by the commissioners as too Catholic. Undeterred, Wren made a new plan that toned down the dome and topped it with a steeple. The royal warrant approving this design allowed for "variations, rather ornamental than essential." Wren exploited this loophole to perfection, gradually and surreptitiously slipping in many of his Great Model ideas without advertising the fact. By the time anyone realised what he had done, it was too late to change. Wren was buried in the crypt of St Paul's, with a Latin inscription that says "if you seek a monument, look around".

Fear is the greatest disease in both health services and design. I am frequently inspired by the courage of others dealing with their own anxieties in order to move forward. There are numerous stories of people encountering life-changing conditions or professionals taking risks to create something truly great, often in the face of others' ridicule or corporate conservatism. The "vision not clouded by fear" in the Cherokee proverb will not only transform the life of the individual whose vision it is, but also have significant impact on others, whether through direct contact or by changing the environment.

The greatest concrete results rely on uncovering personal sources of

courage. The ability to identify and express fears is the starting point; only those who ask far-reaching questions of themselves will find the assets to produce the best answers. Reflecting on how you have dealt with apparently immovable obstacles will reveal your own values and purpose in life. Such self-awareness provides greater control for creative and practical solutions.

The more often that obstacles are overcome, the more often new opportunities open on the other side. One such obstacle is the frequent misunderstanding between those designing and running places and those who use them. There is often a barrier between those who see buildings and those who see environments. A dialogue about our different understandings, sharing of fears and collective use of assets will help to create places that not only meet practical and financial requirements, but also promote dignity and wellness in those who have to use them.

My aim for Praxis One is to discover with others new images of health and dignity through design. I also hope that everyone may find at least one new way to face their fears and to leave to create better environments that provide greater dignity and health.

One final thought from a Spanish proverb: "A life lived in fear is a life half lived." How might we ensure a full life for ourselves and others through design? **HD**

Chris Dabbs is Chief Officer of Salford Community Health Council and Coordinator with the School for Social Entrepreneurs.

