

SOFA-INSTALLATION –DESIGN CONCEPT 2018-IIT

Pop-up work LAB – Today, people work everywhere they exist. The world is one big work environment. In order to make the space usable for the inhabitant & draw them in, place electrical connections to plug in their devices or give them books to look at & they will come. Workplace design has undergone a radical transformation in the last several decades, with approximately seventy percent of today’s modern offices , libraries or schools now converted to open plans with a variety . However, despite growing concerns over decreases in productivity and satisfaction, the open space revolution shows no sign of slowing down. The open model has proliferated without regard for natural differences in gathering culture. If we are to make gathering space more effective, we must acknowledge that ultimately, design comes out of adapting individual needs for a specific purpose and at best, can create space that gives the user what they crave.



Thought on space.- When you are the first person to arrive in a meeting room, do you think of it as empty or full?

A meeting space in western culture is made for people to meet. Therefore, if there are no people in the room, the room must be empty. As philosopher Henk Oosterling remarks, “a room is empty until someone enters.” In regards to the eastern sensibility, space is understood a bit differently. In Japan, spaces have meanings prior to any activity happens within them. This installation by IIT students will attempt to merge both.

A space in Eastern culture is understood by how it shapes relationships, the same meeting room in Tokyo would appear full of symbols and instructions about how interactions can and should occur. In this way, a room is always filled with invisible structures, regardless of its occupants. Instead of framing space as a relationship between objects and walls, the Japanese concept of space is about the relationships among people. By shifting this view, we can discover an interesting way of thinking about the spaces we make and use in everyday life—and the relationships that they create. Western designers and architects have long found the Japanese concept of space fascinating, but there’s also a lot the rest of us can learn about different cultures and how they approach space as both a concept and a practice. Mitsuru Kodama, a professor at Nihon University, argues that Japanese concepts of space derive from two foundational traditions: Shinto (an indigenous spiritual tradition in Japan) and Buddhism (imported from mainland Asia).

From Shinto came the high value placed on harmony in relationships and a focus on the connections—spoken and unspoken—that tie people together. From Buddhism came the ideas of emptiness and selflessness. These concepts “entail not engaging in any fixed ideas or actions,” Kodama says. Even the word for person in Japanese, *ningen*, reflects differences in how interactions and identity are understood. The first part (*nin*) represents a human being, and the second (*gen*) stands for space, or in-between. The understanding of a person isn’t distinct and atomistic, but rather is made up of the connections and relationships that people form as they interact with each other. happens.

The four kinds of space

Japanese people have at least four different words for “space,” most of them quite different than their English equivalent.

Instead of being about the built environment, the Japanese words for space center on the interactions and relationships among people. Of the four terms that reflect an aspect of space, each looks at human relationships from a different perspective, and each is potentially useful in considering the spaces we all make and use.

- **Relational space (*wa*)**
“We sat across from each other in the small room, which made the *wa* very tense and confrontational.”
- **Knowledge-mobilizing space (*ba*)**
“Having all the different departments work on the project together meant things went slow, but the *ba* was great, and the breakthrough wouldn’t have been possible otherwise.”
- **Location (*tokoro*)**
“Although they both loved camping, taking three flights to get there seemed like the wrong *tokoro* for a honeymoon”
- **Negative space (*ma*)**
“The *ma* at this event is awful! There’s no time to think or breathe in between the presentations, networking, and meals.”

Relational space (*wa*), “We sat across from each other in the small room, which made the *wa* very tense and confrontational.”

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Wa is often translated as harmony, but that isn't 100% accurate. *Wa* is an awareness of interpersonal connection and is often described in terms of moving air. Every space has a certain quality that influences the types of relationships that form there, and *wa* recognizes the way that relationships are affected by the space they're in.

For example, visitors to Japan who are aware of the country's strict and respectful professional nature are often amazed at how lively and active the night life can be. Long days at the office are often followed by a long night of revelry, drinking, and conversation. One reason that colleagues go out together is to maintain *wa* and reinforce their relationships.

Workplaces are designed for a particular set of interpersonal connections, and working together can create stresses and frictions that need to be addressed. In most societies, the office is understood as an unsuitable environment to do this. Instead, an *izakaya*, a kind of Japanese bar, allows for different relationships to come forward. Alcohol, private and semi-private rooms, and intimate table set-ups allow for opinions to be expressed that would be unthinkable in the office environment. Employees can tell off their bosses and unsuitable behavior can be surfaced and addressed. We can all be more conscious about the spaces in which we choose to perform different tasks or have different conversations. These locations have an effect on the kinds of relationships we form. If we want someone to share how they are feeling, what spaces are more likely to support this? Is a noisy coffee shop the right place to broach a sensitive subject? What about a candlelit dinner at a romantic restaurant?

Knowledge-mobilizing space (*ba*)

"Having all the different departments work on the project together meant things went slow, but the *ba* was great, and the breakthrough wouldn't have been possible otherwise." *Ba* is about the arrangement of elements to create connections that are more likely to produce new knowledge or experiences. While *wa* focuses on relationships, *ba* is concerned with how knowledge is formed and shared. If *wa* is about social and interpersonal harmony, *ba* is about ensuring that people's knowledge and experience can be put to good use.

The open-office concept is a reflection of *ba* as a design principal. Japanese offices are often very open with many workers sharing a large table and workspace. This arrangement allows for the rapid sharing of information, sometimes by accident. The Japanese also prioritize interdisciplinary teams because they believe that the concentration of different ways of seeing the world will lead to breakthroughs. There is often a lack of efficiency when bringing together different specializations, but *ba* requires shared space for different relationships and experiences to be brought forward.

To endow our lives with *ba*, we might follow social media accounts that are outside of our experience or tastes, attend events or conferences outside of our specialization, and meet and interact with people we might not normally meet. *Ba* asks us to be open to interruptions and distractions when our temptation is to be closed and focused. The assumption is that what we know is only valuable if it rubs up against what other people know.

Location (*tokoro*)

"Although they both loved camping, taking three flights to get there seemed like the wrong *tokoro* for a honeymoon" *Tokoro* is used to describe the location or site of something, but it is also used to describe a state of being. In Japan, the idea of place is indistinguishable from the historical, cultural, social, and other connections contained within it. The idea of *tokoro* therefore implies the idea of context, as the place is inevitably connected with all the activities around it.

If *wa* configures your relationships in space, *tokoro* situates that activity within a bigger story. It's a little bit different to the Western concept of location, however. Western concepts of space have an inside and outside and a boundary between the two. This makes it easier to think about things as being contained within larger things and containing smaller things: An office is in New York City, which is in the United States. The sales team is inside the office, and Jules is a member of the sales team.

Japanese concepts of space are ambivalent about boundaries, so being a part of a place means being in dynamic relationship with it. In Japan, a building can't be in Tokyo without Tokyo being in the building.

Negative space (*ma*)

"The *ma* at this event is awful! There's no time to think or breathe in between the presentations, networking, and meals."

Ma is often translated as negative space. However, *ma* is better understood as a free zone that allows for dissimilar things to co-exist. When we communicate something, we like to assume that the person will receive our message and understand it in the way that we intended. This is often not the case. If I tell you "I am hungry," you might interpret this as information, as a command to feed me, as an indictment of your talents as a host, or something else entirely.

The Japanese idea of *ma* is that we need to create interruptions or absences that allow for difference to be reconciled. Designing for *ma* is about creating moments of awareness and quiet.

For example, in Japan, shrines are often built at the end of long uphill hikes; the long and tiring walk prepares the mind to enter the shrine and leave behind other distractions and worries. Cities are scattered with small parks that appear suddenly and offer winding trails for quiet reflection. Even conversations in Japanese are marked by long pauses that would be unsettling for Western ears.

Being intentional about creating spaces that allow for reflection and integration might allow us to better address some of the contradictions and tensions of modern life. Difference of opinion rarely seems to coexist peaceably, and transitions from home to work to home again are often marked by crowds and stress. There are therefore many ways we can make room for more *ma* in our lives. Meditation is a wonderful way of collecting oneself during a busy day. Visits to the library can prove a worthwhile respite from an increasingly commercial world. In our homes, we can restrict technology from certain areas. Where is the empty space in our day?

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Thinking about spaces in a more 'Japanese' way can open up new ways of organizing our lives and focusing on the relationships that matter to us. Building spaces that deepen relationships (*wa*), generate new knowledge (*ba*), connect to the world around us (*tokoro*), and allow moments of quiet and integration (*ma*) can enrich our experience of the world and that of those around us.

