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AN IDEAL WRITING CENTER
Re-Imagining Space and Design

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We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.

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The belief that architecture can stimulate health, wealth, and happiness lies at the base of the fascination with *feng shui,* the 3,000-year-old Chinese practice of placing objects, walls, and people in harmony. Some teachers claim that classrooms that have been given the *feng shui* treatment produce students who are "pumped about learning" (May 2000, A10). Others find that clearing clutter, making a place "light and cheery," and adding plants makes common sense; there's no "magic in it" (A10). In Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), magic is invoked in the design of a new shop when its owner consults with the pseudo-scientist and astrologist. The salesman certainly believes magic can trick his customers into buying more:

> I am a young beginner, and am building
> Of a new shop, and't like your worship, just
> At corner of a street—here's the plot on't—
> Which way I should make my door, by necromancy,
> And where my shelves, and which should be for boxes,
> And which for pots. I would be glad to thrive, sir.
> And I was wished to your worship by a gentleman,

One Captain Face, that says you know men's planets,
And their good angels, and their bad.

(Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, 1.3.10–16)

Invoking magic in a store design improves trade? The look and feel of architectural spaces does influence its occupants and visitors. As Winston Churchill philosophized, "We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us." On one campus, a new liberal arts building received architectural awards, but its occupants termed it the "death star" for its inhospitable structure. Although an imaginative architectural place, its concrete form and substance do not foster creativity.

Learning can take place anywhere, from the storefront buildings of a tribal college to a grassy quad during springtime. In fact, we expect imagination to thrive in unimaginative spaces.[1] Terry Vaughan, architect and teacher, "believes in the importance of connecting people, places, and landscape, . . . that teaching and learning are more effective in places of particular character and clear position within the university" (1991, 15). Keeping that philosophy in mind, if the opportunity presents itself to enhance or build an ideal learning space—in this case, an ideal writing center—what are the considerations? What are the needed resources? To whom do we turn for consultation? On many campuses, expertise resides in campus planners, support staff, and design faculty.

To think about the spaces where tutoring occurs, we assembled an interdisciplinary research team: three undergraduates (a writing tutor and two interior design students) and two faculty members (a professor of English and a professor of interior design). The undergraduates led the research project with guidance from the faculty mentors. While the vocabularies of our different disciplines produced a certain language barrier, we learned that what we had in common was a sense of *process*.

PEDAGOGY AND DESIGN

When charting unfamiliar territory, we turn to that which has been written on the subject. Unfortunately, there is a paucity of literature on the pedagogical building or learning space. A good deal exists on designing elementary school rooms (remember the "pod" concept?), but the challenge of creating imaginative college classroom spaces gets short shrift. Even when we do find some useful information about college classrooms and construction, a space such as a writing center—which is neither classroom nor office—is not addressed.[2] We reviewed

the concepts of effective working and learning spaces before we turned to the particular task of designing a tutorial center.

Architect and academic Josef Stagg (1991) divides architects into two categories: formalist (which emphasizes the visual) and behaviorist (which emphasizes human behavior). The formalists controlled corporate America for a number of years, favoring designs that won awards but did not provide comfort to employees stuck in mind-numbing, cookie-cutter cubicles. Architectural behaviorists focus more on "environmentally and behaviorally oriented approaches to design" (20). They note that task performance and job satisfaction are affected by ambient conditions (e.g., uncomfortable room temperature, stuffy air quality, lack of natural light, loud colors, surrounding noise) and room size, presence and arrangement of furniture and equipment (21). Behaviorists lead in "creating diverse, vital spaces that foster creativity and serendipity" (Gladwell 2000, 60), and their corporate *campuses* may very well provide the model that will eventually arrive—ironically arrive, we might add—on college campuses. In the corporate world, workplace design has as its goal creating spaces that offer happy and productive work lives to employees and invite interaction among disparate groups of people. An office that follows this tack might very well look more like a village or feel more like a neighborhood.

The architectural philosophy of Christopher Alexander of the University of California, Berkeley Center for Environmental Structure, articulated in a three-volume series, resonated with our research team. He endorses the concept of organic architecture based on piecemeal growth and participatory decision-making. *The Oregon Experiment* (1975), although somewhat dated, provides key concepts for thinking about what a campus looks like. Based on the idea that people "should design for themselves their own houses, streets, and communities," the book espouses principles adopted by the University of Oregon as it replaced its traditional planning with what were almost 30 years ago—and probably still are—radical concepts about process and outcomes. "Everyone helps to shape the parts of the environment that he knows best" (38) according to Alexander. People who use the spaces "must own them psychologically" (41). Universities are places that "are created and modified by the people who pass through them[;] the university will gradually be shaped by an accumulation of actual human experience and, as such, will be a place fit for other, newer human

experiences—a place far fitter than any impersonal and inflexible environment could ever be" (49).

The three volumes by Alexander and his colleagues demonstrate that structures can be imaginative, healthy, and inspiring. Besides *The Oregon Experiment*, Alexander's first volume, *A Timeless Way of Building* (1979), laid the foundation for his architectural theory while volume two in the series, *A Pattern Language* (1977), defined an architectural language to enact that theory. Of some 250 patterns developed, Alexander found 18 "special patterns to solve . . . problems . . . peculiar to universities." These particular patterns focus on the concepts of an open university, student housing distribution, living learning circles, department space, local administration, classroom distribution, student workplaces, real learning in cafes, and department hearths. These are coupled with overarching principles of positive outdoor space, arcades, wings of light, south facing outdoors, tree places, access to water, and activity nodes (105–106). Alexander's concept of "wings of light," making use of natural illumination, becomes important to writing center design since so much close reading occurs there.

Alexander proposes including students, staff, and faculty members in discussion of physical design. Would that it were so. Typical to campuses, but antithetical to Alexander's principles, is the "master plan" that charts the next 20 years. It is the rare faculty member who actually knows what committee or office on campus determines the physical space that surrounds him or her. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) envisions a "faculty role whenever *academic quality is at stake*" (9, emphasis added) to represent teachers' and students' perspectives. As a special issue of *Academe* on "The Pedagogical Building" (1991) notes: "good rooms will not necessarily make us good teachers, but bad rooms will assuredly make us bad ones." If faculty members participated on the planning committee for a humanities building would seats have been bolted in place in classrooms? We think not.

The effects of architectural decisions greet teachers daily. Why is a lectern fixed before the screen so that films are difficult to see, or why are classroom doors positioned in such a way that tardy students must necessarily disrupt the class? Terry Wilson Vaughan (1991) maintains that "good architecture can inspire a new understanding of teaching" and influence curricula, an observation made after her academic program was moved among a number of university sites, "some magnifi-

cent, some faceless" (12). Some spaces promoted synergy between two studio classes and their faculty, and student projects were the best they ever had been, she asserts. Harvey J. Kaye reminds us that it's not just our classrooms but also our offices that reflect faculty members' "intellectual traditions" and serve as "vessels of self-expression." Yes, there is "pedagogical significance" in offices that are monotonous "institutional spaces" until shaped by the desire to turn them "into exhibition spaces that materially substantiate our arguments and tales" (B16).

A writing center is a curious mix of office and classroom, but metaphors of home are also often used to describe writing centers with the proverbial coffee pot offering a welcoming cup. Muriel Harris highlighted the welcoming cup in her chapter in Kinkead and Harris (1993a) that described the writing center she built at Purdue (4). Yes, home and hominess are important, if intangible. According to architectural theorists, space and design decisions should result in a space where people enjoy spending time and where they are happy, productive, creative, and social. Those are certainly worthy goals for a writing center.

We move now from the overarching principles of university and workplace design to the specific task of designing an effective writing center, drawing on the participatory process delineated by Alexander and the expertise of our Design Program team members.

THE DESIGN PROCESS

For our project, we assumed a new building at Alchemy University, which has a student population of 10,000. Other assumptions: the writing center employs sufficient tutors to assure that four to six tutors are available in the center at any given time; a director, assistant director, and full time receptionist are on staff. The main activity of AU's center is one-to-one tutoring, but areas for group conferences and study are needed, too. The final supposition is that a computer lab should be adjacent to the center for flexibility between word processing and tutoring.

The research team interviewed those who use and work in a center. For designers, the term for research and data collection is *programming*, a systematic approach to gathering, analyzing, and interpreting specific quantitative and qualitative project requirements. (See the appendix for specific questions to be asked.) Following this stage, the designers developed a number of *space* plans, working with their informants in an itera-

tive way to arrive at a design that architecturally enhances and functionally contributes to the mission of the center. The physical environment is especially important in peer tutoring. For some students, seeking help is anxiety provoking. Our goal was to create a non-threatening, comfortable environment that generates—rather than inhibits—conversation. We took these concepts and issues into consideration as we debated the plan for our writing center, adding what we know about design that makes for an inviting learning space. Not surprisingly, all three groups—tutors, students, and staff—share common ideas about what makes an ideal writing center.

THE SPACE PLAN

The environment that we developed for an ideal writing center is calm, non-threatening, and easily understood. (See Figures 1 and 2.) The overall square footage of our center is 4,813, the main area totaling 2,788 and the computer lab 2,025. At the entrance of the writing center is an information center, a visual that serves as an introduction even if the center is closed. Bulletin boards outside the entrance demystify tutoring for the first-time visitor by offering explanations as well as photographs of actual sessions. As the students walk in, they immediately see a reception desk where they can sign in and be welcomed. Cross (2000) points out that in environmental psychology, people have a "general response to a room and will be unsure at first in a new space. Even air movement affects the occupants."

The designers on our team echoed this theory by reminding us that the question always in the mind of a first-time visitor to any space is "How will I be welcomed and is this a situation where I'll find myself embarrassed?" Seeing into a space begins to obviate a sense of dread.

The room is comfortable, with familiar eight-foot ceilings; light, calming colors; soft carpet; plants, and soft lighting—provided by cove lighting and a skylight. Daylight is considered more inviting and conducive to a positive work environment, but ambient, task, and accent light sources are also used for specific areas. The indirect cove lighting, using warm, fluorescent lamps, makes a horizontal line throughout the room, which has a calming effect, bounces off the ceiling, and eliminates shadows. A waiting area features durable yet comfortable sofa and chairs covered in soft green fabrics, green being a universally accepted and reassuring color. The green chosen here is a *cool* color, but almost any color can be perceived as calming if presented in the proper value
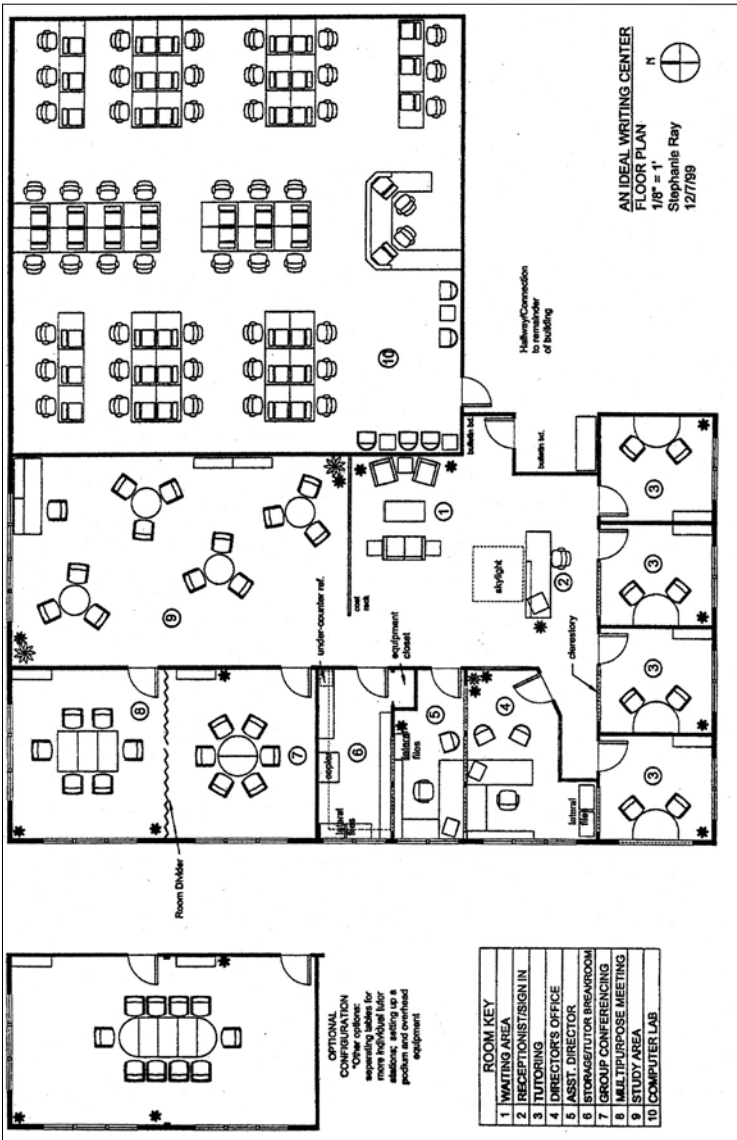
Figure 1. Space plan for the writing center. Design by Stephanie H. Ray.

and level of intensity. The table and shelves are made from light wood, which warms the room.

A moveable room divider separates the waiting area and the group study area and can be removed to extend the room for workshops or meetings. While in place, it gives the study area privacy. Tutors expressed concern about noise levels during their interviews, which led

the designers to include an acoustics plan, taking into account natural and electronic solutions. Speech privacy and intelligibility can be accomplished simply by recognizing that thick, porous, and soft materials absorb more sound than do materials that are thin, dense, and hard. *White noise*, a subtle, electronically-produced background noise, is used to mask conversational level dialogue.

Across from the study area, along the west wall, a group conference room and a multipurpose meeting room are closed off from the rest of the center by a wall to lower the noise level. This room could be the site of the tutor-development seminar. Inside, an accordion-type divider separates the group conference section from the multipurpose section. It can be opened to join the two rooms. The round table in the group conference room can be split and added to the ends of the rectangular tables in the multipurpose room to create a large race-track-shaped conference table. This also allows room for a podium and computer technology used in presentations such as an overhead projector and a flat screen video system. These rooms, like the waiting area, have soothing colors and soft lighting.

A small workroom, which serves as a storage place and a tutor station, with lateral files and a copier, separates the group areas from the director's office. This room provides a sound barrier between the louder group areas and the quieter tutoring area. The tutors asked for a place to "dump our backpacks" while the director said, "don't clutter up the workroom." The types of storage required and the pieces of equipment to be accommodated drive the size and configuration of this area. It may be the one space that requires a plumbing plan if a sink is included for receptions and lunches.

The director requested an office that is central; she can see the tutoring rooms through the office door. The trade-off between oversight and privacy is a difficult one. A director needs access, influence, and control, according to Smith (1994, 40) but also engages in confidential conversations regarding the administration of the center. A new role—fundraiser and steward to donors—means the director may also use the writing center as a space for receptions. A staff member that must be all, see all, and hear all challenges even good design. For the director, who is in the center for long hours, we must never forget the importance of windows to her well-being. Likewise, the *task* chair, mounted on a pedestal base with casters, must be comfortable.
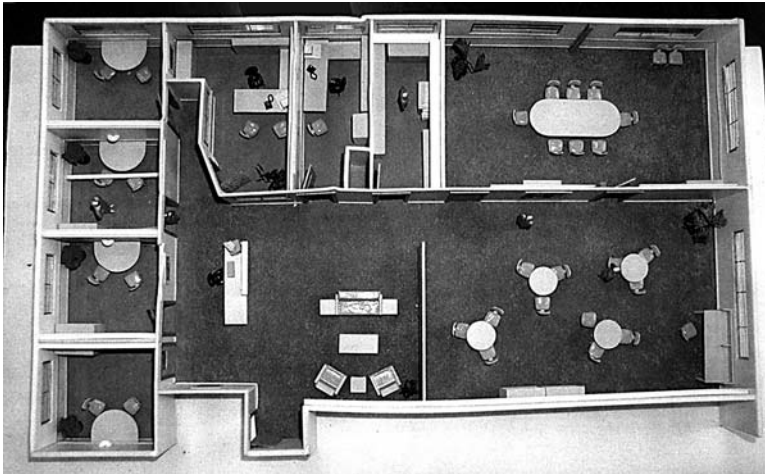
Figure 2. Photograph of model. Model by Stephanie H. Ray and Sarah S. Preston.

The tutoring rooms, positioned along the south wall behind the receptionist, have the same encouraging colors and soft lighting. While round tables are standard, in these small rooms, a half-round table is placed against the sidewall and has two *pull-up* or *guest* chairs. The surfaces of the table and the simple fabric designs eliminate distractions and strain and make it easier for students to focus on their papers during a conference. A window on the south wall, which allows the warmest light in for most of the day, and sconces above the table that bring the light closer to the students' level and reduce shadows, create a bright but not harsh environment. Our designers considered surface mountings, pendants, indirect, and down-lights before deciding on the sconces. A designer uses specific lighting language, beginning with the type of light or *lamp*. While most people would describe a lamp as an item to set on a table, technically, a *lamp* is a *light bulb*, which comes in three basic types: *incandescent, fluorescent,* and *high-intensity discharge*. The electrical plan includes lighting but also wiring, data ports, and switches. The volubility of technology dictates planning for sufficient power outlets as well as data ports and, possibly, docking stations. Wireless connectivity may be a possibility. The space is designed to accommodate tutorials based on hard copy or computer screen copy. Each tutoring room also includes standard reference materials organized for quick and easy retrieval. Finally, the tutors said, "please don't forget plants and art," aesthetic additions to the rooms.

This non-threatening environment enhances writing center conferences by helping the students feel more relaxed and welcome. The design conveys to students that the writing center is a place where they can receive help without the pressure that comes with a classroom environment.

Our research revealed yet another value that is included in our plan: *green design.* Because we are aware of the environmental consequences of our design choices and our daily behaviors we have included elements to minimize "negative environmental impact" ("Green" 2001, 5). These elements include efficient, reliable heating and cooling systems as well as policies for our use of natural resources such as paper.

BUILDING VERSUS REMODELING

While the construction of an ideal writing center may not be within reach for every campus, the components that enhance the center can be implemented in remodeling. Plants, artwork, furniture, colors, and lighting are all factors that can easily be changed or added to improve a writing center. A campus' deferred maintenance budget may be available for such changes. Resources in time, money, and effort are, of course, major issues in any plan for building or remodeling space. Surprisingly, the current cost of building new space or remodeling old is nearly equal. Some campuses employ "organizational experts" to assess efficiency of existing space and make suggestions for improved flow of traffic and human interactions. Space has been called "the organization's second most expensive resource" (Becker and Steele 1995), and yet the literature on the architecture of effective learning environments is precious little.

The environment where interaction between and among people occurs is crucial as it affects the way people feel and, therefore, the way people interact. A well-designed writing center has an identity that speaks implicitly to its patrons. It's not alchemy. It is instead the collaboration of experts—those in design and those in writing—who come together in a participatory, iterative process to plan and structure an environment for learning.

APPENDIX

The term for research and data collection in architecture and interior design is *programming*, a systematic approach to gathering, analyzing, and interpreting specific quantitative and qualitative project requirements. The better the response to a designer's questions, the better the overall outcome of a project. An initial conversation between the client and the designer/architect might include information on flaws, problems, and situations of the current setting, but the staff should be prepared to address the following, which will be useful in the development of the project *program*.

1. Usable square footage requirements: from existing or new construction and how this will be allocated, i.e., by user group or support function.
2. Current and projected user requirements, keeping in mind long-range planning to avoid underestimating future needs.
3. Adjacency requirements: who needs to be next to whom and what.
4. Job classifications of those using the space: director, assistant director, tutors. (Some campuses will have square footage amounts assigned to particular ranks or positions.)
5. Work surface area: how many and what are their ideal sizes?
6. Machine use: list all types of equipment to be used (e.g., computers, printers, copiers).
7. Workstation area: how much space is ideal for the task to be performed, offering specific dimensions if possible.
8. Conference requirements: number to accommodate, which indicates number of chairs needed—with or without arms—and type of chairs.
9. Storage: how much storage and of what type.
10. Configuration: include any ideas about where work areas should be located and if it's important to face a certain direction.
11. Lighting: consider ambient (general) lighting, task lighting, and accent lighting. The latter is often left out but can provide a significant boost to the aesthetic quality of the environment.
12. Accessories: what types of objects will be added that will be functional (e.g., tack boards) or aesthetic (e.g., artwork, plants) and how many.
13. Safety/ADA: compliance with fire codes and with regulations regarding Americans with Disabilities Act.
14. Institutional image, branding, or look that may include specified character, detailing, and symbolic values.