



## Meetings Architecture is Changing How Conference Centers Do Business

By Andrea Doyle September 23, 2011

Conference centers are remarkably effective environments for meetings. But an innovative concept known as “meeting architecture,” which encompasses much more than physical architecture, can improve upon the experience at a center, turning a good meeting into a great one.

Meeting architecture is the process of creating meetings from the inside out, says veteran planner Terri Breining, principal of Encinitas, CA-based Breining Group, a consortium focusing on the development and production of effective meetings. “This approach looks beyond logistics management to a much wider experience that creates results, and then assesses those results afterwards and makes course corrections for the next meeting,” she says. “It is about creating something that has a much longer impact than a typical meeting.”

According to Breining, it starts with identifying the change, motivation, knowledge, skills, and connections you will want participants to take away from the meeting, and then translates that information into clear and measurable objectives for the event. “In the execution of the meeting, it’s integrating the best practices from other professions, such as environmental design, to enhance learning and retention,” adds Breining.

Conference centers have begun embracing the concept of meeting architecture, and the result has been facilities that feature uniquely designed settings, technical sophistication, and specialized services geared toward gatherings of all types. Here’s how it’s impacting the way meetings are executed.

### **Environmental ROI**

John Potterton, president of Potterton & Associates, a business-impact consulting firm, facilitated a Thought Leaders Summit that explored best practices in meeting architecture at the International Association of Conference Centers’ (IACC) annual conference earlier this year. Participants concluded that planners and facility managers should place more emphasis on creating environments that are conducive to executing measurable, compelling meeting experiences.

“A successful meeting should have some kind of business impact, such as an improvement in revenue or efficiency,” says Potterton. “This drives what the physical space, content, and education will be; it creates a system for what happens after the meeting.”

According to the attendees at the Summit, it is now more important than ever for planners and facility managers to be attuned to outcomes that are expected and use them to create an appropriate experience together. The key is for both parties to be strategic partners who ask

insightful questions and listen intently. It's much more involved than just providing the physical environment and the food and beverage.

But when it does come to the physical meeting site, Joan Eisenstodt, meetings industry consultant, trainer, and facilitator, and chief strategist at Washington, DC-based Eisenstodt Associates, is especially bullish on conference centers.

“As far as creating an environment that can have a measurable impact on the success of a meeting, I believe conference centers are better positioned to achieve that than other types of venues,” Eisenstodt says. “They are interested in who the client is, why they are meeting, and what they can provide to help make the meeting even more successful. Conference centers continue to excel at adaptability. There is the atmosphere of, ‘Yes, we can, and here is how we can do it.’”

Potterton says much of that adaptability comes from the fact that 35 of the 39 criteria for IACC certification focus on the physical environment of the facility. “These universal criteria ensure each member center employs the best practices of the conference center industry,” he explains.

When it comes to measuring the effectiveness of the space itself, Jeff Vredevoogd, director of education for Herman Miller, a global provider of furniture and office services based in Zeeland, MI, says there are six characteristics of effective learning/meeting spaces. They are adaptability, socialness, resourcefulness, healthfulness, sustainability, and stimulation.

“These six elements are important, and if you can get all six, hallelujah,” says Breining, adding, “It's the responsibility of the planner to determine which of these six are most important for her particular group.” She notes that how the space is used will depend on the overall meeting objective, the objective of a particular session, the makeup of the audience (demographic, psychographic), the length of the session and overall meeting, and the format of the session.

## **The Six in Action**

Here is a look at the six characteristics of effective meeting space and how they come into play at conference centers.

### **1. Adaptability**

“Any space within a center is a potential learning space, so the space should adapt to the needs of the users,” says Vredevoogd. “In addition to learning, adaptable spaces support collaboration, connection, and community, which are all critical to an effective learning or meeting experience.”

A mixture of relaxed discussion and study areas, spaces that expand or contract depending on need, and private or group spaces should coexist in the same place. “Furnishings need to move and morph and support the immediate task at hand,” says Vredevoogd. “The furniture, technology, and shell itself should be able to transform from a lecture, to a collaborative environment, to a dining environment, and to a social environment.”

At Herman Miller's facility for seminars, the Marigold Learning Center (MLC), in Holland, MI, adaptable spaces include tables and seating that allow for multiple layouts, a variety of wall surfaces that allow for visuals to be tacked up, and writing surfaces that support presentation and sharing.

Eisenstodt says adaptable centers allow groups to use lobbies and meeting room foyers, dining areas, bars when not in use by the general public, and outdoor areas for gatherings. But she adds that "this involves a huge negotiation piece with the conference center about the use of the space and the hours of use."

Because of their adaptability, conference centers are especially suited to alternative models of meetings like Open Space Technology. Named by Harrison Owen in 1985, Open Space Technology is a method by which participants at a gathering set the topics and discuss them, gather thoughts and notes, and capture the information for use by the larger group. "It is easy and it is complex," notes Eisenstodt. "It's easier to do at a conference center because there are so many gathering spaces."

## **2. Socialness**

"Learning is a social activity, and it's critical to build opportunities for guests, facilitators, and staff to engage with each other," acknowledges Vredevoogd. "While most conference centers offer social spaces, planning for how they can best support needs for today, as well as for the future, is critical."

The MLC supports broad levels of engagement during sessions, breakouts, and breaks by offering areas to gather for conversation. Access to the outside, visually and physically, allows guests to informally continue their work away from the meeting room, while staying connected to the indoor space to complete the task at hand.

The fall issue of Meeting Discoveries, a whitepaper series authored by the National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA, reveals that in order for a space to be social, it must encourage impromptu and informal groups where attendees can engage in the learning process. The focus of the whitepaper is on the future of conferences, including social space and design.

Insight from Adrian Segar, author of Conferences That Work: Creating Events That People Love, is included in the whitepaper. According to his research, organizations are now following a 70-20-10 rule: Seventy percent of adult learning is done through social learning with peers, 20 percent is self-directed learning such as reading a book or an article, and 10 percent is formal learning.

According to the whitepaper, social space enables collaboration and learning, which are key terms in conference design today.

## **3. Resourcefulness**

"Resourceful spaces promote wise use of assets now and into the future," says Vredevoogd.

Both resourcefulness and the sheer size of the National Conference Center give planners flexibility when using the space. There is 265,000 square feet of conference space and 917 guest

rooms. Although it specializes in training meetings for corporate, governmental, and nonprofit groups, the center's size gives it the versatility to host a wide variety of other events.

"We specialize in meetings. This very fact makes conference centers resourceful," says Eric Whitson, director of sales and marketing for the National Conference Center. "We're like having an insurance policy for all the things that can go wrong in a meeting." PowerPoint problem, A/V snafu, connectivity catastrophe? No problem. Whitson points out that there are 10 professionals on his A/V-telecommunications team alone to whom he can turn if problems arise.

Eisenstodt recalls with fondness the resourcefulness of the staff at the Chaminade Conference Center in Santa Cruz, CA. Not only has she held conferences at this property, but she has been an attendee at events on property as well. One annual conference she participates in is a gathering of women involved in the hospitality industry; the event has been held at the Chaminade Conference Center for the past eight years.

"As part of the planning process, the Chaminade staff asked us all about the different hats we wear," says Eisenstodt. "We were shocked to enter the break area and find a string of different hats hung from the ceiling. We found out later that the staff was instructed to bring in their most unusual hats. Now, that's resourceful."

#### **4. Healthfulness**

Healthful spaces incorporate ergonomic principles and sustain one's physical well being. "While this one may be obvious to many, it is very important to consider all the factors that make for a safe, comfortable, and effective experience," says Vredevoogd. "Attributes of space include effective lighting, air temperature, air quality, ergonomic tools, and more. Each one, if done poorly, can negatively impact attendee focus and overall impression of the event."

#### **5. Sustainability**

"Sustainable spaces make a difference to the world outside them and to the quality within them," says Vredevoogd. "It is more than using environmentally friendly materials. It's having a facility that works well with the local environment and community and supports many different activities. It's flexible and adaptable."

Kristin Kurie is president of The Wilderman Group, a Charleston, SC-based company that specializes in the development and management of meeting and conference centers. Kurie notes that the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program is the gold standard in green facilities and says that when organizations are housed in LEED Gold buildings, they expect the same standards from the facilities in which they hold meetings.

Kurie offers the Gastonia Conference Center, currently under construction in Gastonia, NC, as an example of a center doing it right. This facility, scheduled to open in November, is on track to be Gold certified by LEED. "Groups meeting at Gastonia will know that their events are having a positive impact on the community," says Kurie. "The facility has created the Gastonia Partnership Program, where local businesses can apply for the opportunity to work with the center's clients, share resources, and further invest in the community. "

## **6. Stimulation**

Learning spaces need to promote thinking. “Stimulating environments draw us in. They are the places we want to be,” says Vredevoogd.

The stimulation factor was part of the original vision of Monona Terrace, which opened in 1938 on the shore of Lake Monona in downtown Madison, WI. “Originally designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Monona Terrace depicts his infamous style of organic architecture, where Wright’s primary focus was to bring the outdoor environment inside the building,” explains Fran Puleo, community relations manager for the facility. “With sweeping views from many of the rooms, thanks to the sheer abundance of glass, a large amount of natural light flows through the building—and that’s due not only to windows, but to glass interior walls, as well. In addition, other Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired elements also stimulate thinking and set a mood for creative discussion.”

Not all centers have the Wright touch, but even small changes can stimulate attendees. Eisenstodt remembers a meeting she had at Chaminade where she was working the registration/greeting area. “A conference services woman walked by, took in the scene, and returned with a vase of fresh flowers. It totally changed the look and feel of the area,” she says.

### **Putting It All Together**

“Looking at the large number of seminars and meetings that have taken place at Marigold, we’ve confirmed the critical role each of the six characteristics plays. The effective design of space truly has an impact on the interactions that happen within it,” says Vredevoogd. “Any space within a conference center is a potential learning space. In addition to learning, adaptable spaces support collaboration, connection, and community, all critical to an effective meeting.”

Effective meeting and learning space design can be developed by using “The Four Ps,” an equation that Vredevoogd uses with his clients: People + Pedagogy (training) + Place = Possibilities. This formula helps examine the needs of key stakeholders in a meeting or facility along with the forms of learning that are desired.

“There’s a saying that goes, ‘You can go to college and get a degree, or get engaged and get an education,’” says Vredevoogd. While the comment was originally intended to drive deeper involvement on campus, it easily translates into the meetings milieu. “It is critical that you look at the entire experience as you design a meeting/learning experience for your clients.”

Bob Dean, a former chief learning officer for several large firms, including Ernst & Young, and a longtime user of conference centers, says Vredevoogd’s six elements of effective space should be applied to one overarching purpose: “To customize the total space in a way that would maximize the benefit to my people and my objectives.”

He advises planners to ask conference centers to provide examples of meetings they’ve worked on that have implemented all these elements. “Ask to see photographs of some of the sessions where interesting things were done. That way, planners can see exactly what it looks like, and how they can build their own experiences from that. This way, the facility contacts have become meeting architects who can be true partners in the event.”

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