

“The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: We are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersections with its own skin.”

Michael Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”¹

just as the factory floor eliminated extraneous human movement to ensure robotic efficiency, accuracy, and the IQ equivalent of a machine. The errors of this old economy are obvious with hindsight: we know now that what we really needed was another head—more knowledge—and not necessarily another pair of hands. And we found out that the deprivation of space can and does sink a human to an existence that is nasty and bureaucratic.

Is it any wonder that the vast savannas of the new economy give us a sense of newfound freedom? Instead of becoming a vanishing point in a warehouse of cubicles, today’s knowledge workers become targets of human capital. Pundits have theorized that the vast distance between people would be compensated by the simultaneity of an Internet response, where intimacy would be achieved through immediacy; that theory has been undermined by research that indicates that even those who sit side-by-side in physical proximity continue to communicate through e-mail. Virtual has become the preferred mode. Have we substantively moved away from geography to recapture a sense of the communal, albeit electronic, flow—something we lost somewhere along the way in the fight for the right to be alone in the corner office?

We suggest that the new economy has not replaced our primordial need to be between. Rather, the Information Superhighway has cut a swath through our parochial perceptions and permitted a new view from afar. It has punctuated the evolutionary path we have traveled and let us see how we fit in space and time. Indeed we have met a felt need over the Internet precisely because of the way we live in gated corporate suburbs. But as bland as those corporate suburbs are, we are not likely to abandon physical proximity nor our old institutions because they still meet that primordial need for physical intimacy—that fluid sense of community that comes and goes with belonging and that is inexorably linked to the raw territorialism of our hominid forebears. Virtuality has simply added another dimension to the space-time continuum. It has cast a spotlight on the sterile corporate office where a bureaucrat trumps brain and brawn any day of the week.

If this is so, then the workplace becomes *very* important. In truth, the workplace is the icon of the new millennium. It’s the pivotal place for uniting a divided industry around the common cause of design. Never was design more critical in integrating components of the built environment—built environments sprinkled with spaces called “kitchens,” “front porches,” “courtyards,” and “plazas”—points of intersection between public and private,

opacity and transparency, real and virtual, open and closed, and corporation and family. It has become a new economy hearth, a place of congregation where ideas flow informally among colleagues and are realized in enterprise. It is not that territorial divisions are destined to disappear entirely, but only that they will be reconstituted. Old economy institutions never die without leaving traces of themselves. They persist, not only by sheer force of survival, but because they still answer unmet needs. The material neighborhood will always constitute a bond between men. But it is the redefinition or redistricting of the material neighborhood that catalyzes a unification of an industry now divided by prior conceptions of professional specialization, e.g., territorial divisions, if you will, that are no longer relevant.

Figure 7-1 summarizes some of the more apparent features of each paradigm, comparing recognizable characteristics and hallmarks of the old and new economies.

WHO OWNS THE WORKPLACE?

Owners, those defined as client

Owners, those defined as client or sponsor, real estate developers, financial institutions, architects, interior designers, organizational development analysts, as well as contractors and vendors have all staked a claim. Like professional segregationists, they possessed their own tradition of territorialism to own the intellectual property of their domain. And the resulting built environments, like a reflecting pool, mirrored the composition of that knowledge legacy. They created environments and buildings that were works of art, when perhaps what was needed was more listening about what constituted the “art” of work—the serendipitous interactions—that could give meaning and aesthetic from 9 o’clock to 5 o’clock.

The inertial drag of an industry steeped in its own functional silos ultimately led to more litigation, acrimony, and regulation. Any industry will cannibalize itself if it cannot invent. But threaded through the industry is the common language of design.

The role of the designer in the work of the built environment continues to evolve in a track parallel to our society. When the author Sigfried Giedion