Spaces and interpersonal communication

We have talked before about the power of language to communicate negative or positive attitudes, affirm or deny an elder’s perceptions and set the culture and tone of an organization. Another important component of the experience of being in a community is that physical spaces communicate as well; buildings, by their design, create opportunities for interactions that might equalize or skew power among people having a conversation.

Building design can influence language by how spaces are configured and how access to various locations determines who may speak to whom, when and where. For example, simply by what it takes to gain access to certain spaces in a community, and whether they are designated as public or private (for example, a door marked “private” clearly conveys the message that we are not to enter), residents and employees can feel a part of or left out of the various aspects of the community.

To ensure that our communities are truly home to residents, we must be vigilant about these messages. Too many large, confusing, unwelcoming or forbidden parts of the physical space undermine the sense of community that is important to residents, their visiting family members and employees alike.

SPACES CAN AFFECT COMMUNICATION

Spaces in a building evoke behavior that has been learned by members of a culture, and violations of the rules of decorum are obvious, as when someone has a private cell phone conversation in an elevator, in a loud voice—or questions a resident about a private matter, such as whether he or she is incontinent, in the lobby. We feel uncomfortable being unwittingly exposed to such private parts of a person’s life and it can be a violation of not only privacy but dignity. Honoring the cues given by the built environment—such as where to have private conversations—can help keep everybody comfortable.

Louise Revelli and Maree Stenglin, authors of Feeling Space: Interpersonal Communication and Spatial Semiotics in The APA Handbook of Interpersonal Communication,1 explain the ways that the built environment communicates messages about how people feel about themselves and others in interpersonal relationships. Buildings, like words, “make us feel; they may seem inviting or intimidating; they may make us feel comfortable or uncomfortable; as if we belong or are intruding.”

For example, people usually feel differently in vast open spaces, in a cathedral, museum or palace, and have a different set of feelings in their former primary school, childhood home or living room. Each space is designed to evoke a different emotion and, therefore, have different emotional meanings as far as intimacy and distance are concerned. The physical environment “speaks” to us through the visual metaphors they present.

DESIGN TO OPTIMIZE COMMUNICATION

In traditional nursing homes, the design of the nurses’ station, break room, dining room, lobby, conference room and residents’ rooms all have influence on communication and language because their designs signal who will speak there, what types of language to use in each, when it is appropriate to talk in each space and who is invited to do so. Therefore, one significant way to change...
language in nursing homes is to redesign spaces so that elders have more opportunities to converse in private in more places with people of their choosing—friends, family and staff, or to be alone if they wish.

When we consider the kinds of interactions, and the language we use, in large spaces versus in small, intimate ones, we notice that large spaces don’t typically promote intimate conversations where people take turns talking in a relatively equal relationship. Large, indoor spaces are usually places where one person or group actively “communicates” and others, the “audience,” listen and respond at certain predictable, well-known, socially sanctioned points—these spaces can become more for performing than for conversation. One person presents or performs and listeners serve as an audience, responding during pauses, question-and-answer periods or with applause at the conclusion. The audience is expected to remain essentially nonverbal and silent, except for these culturally congruent times for acknowledgement or invited participation.

LARGE VERSUS SMALL SPACES
Contrast the communication fostered, expected or encouraged in large spaces with the experience of communication in a small, intimate space, where communication is more or less reciprocal. People take turns and silence is a signal for the other party to speak. We want to encourage opportunity for these kinds of interactions in our communities because they are affirming to a feeling of belonging.

Long corridors, dining in groups of 40, no private space except for one’s half of a shared room—these reinforce the metaphor created by the large building design that “in a palace there is no place for intimacy.”

Intimate conversation and informal speech, which are essential for a sense of belonging and community, require private places as a signal that they are welcome and honored in the culture.

SUMMARY
As we navigate our communities, be aware of what the spaces are communicating about our culture. We can ensure a sense of home by being aware of whether residents and employees are able to connect with one another and feel at home in their physical environment.

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REFERENCES