

## **Short notes on Learned Helplessness in the Built Environment**

### ***The SUV***

We can draw an analogy with the safety of motor vehicles. Small cars like the VW Polo are safe because they make their drivers feel unsafe. On the other hand larger four wheel drives are less safe because of the feeling of safety they engender in their drivers.

The feeling of safety is not the solution but the problem.

Studies of safety show that with experience all drivers can learn to exert some degree of control over what might otherwise appear to be an uncontrollable event; eg a child running out onto the street. As a result any conception of safety that revolves entirely around the vehicle is incomplete.

In psychology there is a concept called "learned helplessness" which describes how normally rational people believe there is nothing they can do to influence their own fate. We live in a world that is fixated on the idea of helplessness; we're fascinated by large events like SARS, terrorism and natural disasters, situations in which we feel powerless to affect our own destiny. But the risks posed by the forces outside our control are most often dwarfed by the factors we can control. Our fixation with helplessness distorts our perception of risk. When one feels safe one can be passive.

When this concept is extended into the built environment it is easy to see how the current processes used for the provision of workplaces encourage learned helplessness when it comes to a big issue like the external environment and greenhouse gas emissions. What little progress is being made by more inclusive design processes tends to be confined to aesthetics and non-critical design and management issues, largely associated with spatial elements. The real power is retained by the technical elite who impose technical solutions over unwitting occupants which contribute to the inability of those who actually use the space to having little ability to influence building environmental outcomes or to create the conditions which support productivity or performance enhancement.

Substitute performance for safety as the desired outcome.

The fundamental appeal of the computer technology controlled building environment is that occupants can give up control, relax and presumably get on with work. But this strategy brings with it unintended consequences or risks associated with loss of learning, innovation and knowledge transfer, potential negative impacts on productivity and a disconnection with the physical representation of important corporate symbols which influence satisfaction, motivation, retention and image projection, including brand awareness.

### ***The post-spectacular workplace***

Many modern buildings are about one-way communication. They do a good "technical job" but often they deliver a pre-cooked experience. Workplaces become Pizza Hut deliveries with standardised ingredients thrown together in different combinations on a base plate, rather than providing clients with an a la carte experience.

Are we in transition to a post spectacular workplace where the success of workplace design will be measured by its actual ability to support collaboration, not simply interaction, innovation, intimacy at the edge of chaos and true knowledge based working, both tacit and explicit in nature?

What will matter most in these post spectacular workplaces? Activity not architecture, work practice not process, and an understanding of how people actually use spaces in time.

A most important part of this transition is the way wireless technology and communication is connecting people to other business resources, including places and intangibles on a real time basis and in different combinations. Telecommunications is changing the nature of our interaction, the way we collaborate and the activities that take place in physical locations; industrial, residential, commercial.

The reality is that new technology has in some ways replaced the industrial age, but in many ways it has added to it. Network space has been added to physical space. Mobile phones have not made the commercial space disappear, but have rendered it potentially more powerful as an interface between people and business. Mobile devices have the unintended consequence of reasserting geography by enabling location; that is getting people together in real not virtual spaces.

### ***Is Facility Management already irrelevant?***

The challenge for FM is to provide services that are demand responsive, location aware, and supported by dynamic resource allocation; its an extension of JIT to "Just in Time and Just in Place".

For example, enabling proximity has become the strategic focus of Nokia. That's its "killer application". This suggests that FM, which is still struggling for its own identity and a clear position to advocate, may have already become a redundant in its current guise.

Wireless networks, enabling people, places and things to connect in new and often unexpected ways and times implies more flexible, localised solutions rather than standardised, packaged or even integrated solutions which seem to characterise much of the current thinking in an industry fixated by supply not demand, cost not value, convergent not divergent thinking.

Brian Purdey  
Managing Director  
**KODO**  
The Ark Workspace  
Level2 50 York Street  
PO Box Q1585 QVB  
Sydney NSW 1230 Australia  
T: 612 82431116  
F: 612 82431122  
M: 0410 483 922

**Creativity Vision Leadership**