

THE PRINCIPLE OF CHOICE

REPORTING OUT: A ROUNDTABLE GROUP

“How can the principle of choice be leveraged into planning and designing high-performance settings for learning?”

This is the question we ended with; we did not begin with it. We started with a lot of discussion about students, about the experiences of students as learners, and about the potential of empowering the principle of ‘choice’ for students.

The idea of the principle of choice is when the individual student has a role in making choices about their settings for learning. Having this choice makes the student feel big in comparison to the institution as more choices are available and settings become less prescriptive. This phenomenon relates to the idea of building community, of creating a naturalness of access, of spaces that are not intimidating but rather spaces that signal to students that they can make choices, of spaces in which students have the option to form communities from within and not be dictated to from without.”

“Our discussion was informed by a side-bar conversation how a “choice” environment evolved on my campus. We all thought it was a success and set out to determine the attributes of that success. **One was that it was shabby; another that it was centered. It also had a collective dimension while enabling a wide range of individual and group activities. The space was multi-functional, adaptable, and non-institutional.**”

“We understood these spatial attributes as relevant to our concept of choice from the students’ standpoint, attributes that could be leveraged more directly in designing and planning settings for learning. We tried to filter that institutional story through the concept of choice, beginning by translating attributes of environments that could be seen as choice-rich or could support choice. **We saw that the principle of choice has something to do with the formation of a common ground, that it is a setting for learning that students feel is theirs, not someone else’s space for learning.**”

“This relates to the idea of ownership and freedom of choice within that field of ownership. A sense of ownership and of community scale, the idea of empowering not just individual choice but choice within a broader community of students brought us back to the attribute of centrality.

This is not only in terms of how these attributes are programmed in the planning process, but how they are laced together with different design attributes. The idea of simplicity or plainness (or perhaps messiness) was potentially related to the concept of choice.”

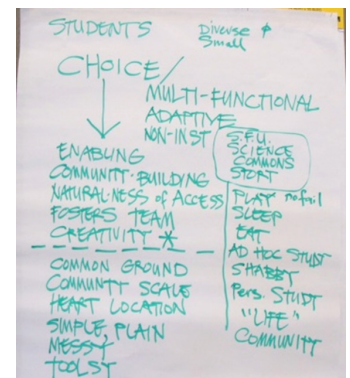
“We thought about learning as being messy, very hands-on. That is the way learning happens and research happens. In planning, we tend to think too much about the end product; we think the space should be like this or like that.

Our spaces should expose more of the process of learning, which is indeed part of the product. **So our idea here is about choice. It is about potential and not so much about product. Without any scientific process guiding our work, we developed the principle:**

Let Happen; Make Happen.”

I remember thinking as a kid that the neighborhood hardware store was the best place in the world. That wasn't just because it was full of weird stuff to discover but that you could do something with that stuff.

— Comment from a Roundtable Architect Colleague



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