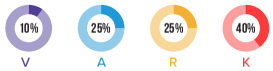
Learning Spaces Collaboratory
2019 National Colloquium

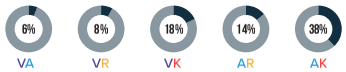
# VERS UN HABITAT INCLUSIF!

***This is a call for a truly inclusive environment; for a varied habitat - conceived, designed and constructed to accommodate all modes of thinking.***

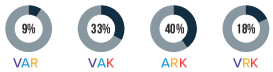
Preference for Single Mode




Bimodal Preference




Trimodal Preference




Preference for All Four Modes

Most standardized tests, like the SATs, are famously centered on assessing verbal and mathematical competencies.[1] And most office and learning environments follow suit.[2]

We have effectively premiated the verbal and the mathematical. In doing so, we have consistently included and supported some individuals, but not all. What we have not explicitly included, we have (de facto) excluded.[3]

As legitimate as they are, the verbal and the mathematical are but two of the many recognized modes of processing information – of thinking, of learning, of working. There is also (at least) the visual, and the aural, and the kinesthetic.[4]

We are now more aware of these fundamental distinctions. But awareness is not acceptance, and mere acceptance does not constitute inclusion.

So what will be provided for those who are more naturally effective, focused, productive, creative, and prolific when they paint, or sing, or dance, or construct?

And what will be provided for those individuals who engage more than one mode? For those who are proficient with both a primary mode and a secondary mode? Or for those who engage various modalities and process by alternating between a single mode, dual modes, or multiple modes?[5]

**This is a call for a truly inclusive environment; for a varied habitat - conceived, designed and constructed to accommodate all modes of thinking.**

**To support/underwrite the contributions of each individual. To support the whole person. To value the whole self; the whole individual; the whole population.**

This extends to the ability to work both individually and in teams of various sizes. And applies as much to workplaces and offices as it does to schools and campuses.

When realized, these habitats must be capable of supporting statements such as:

"I'll read while you paint."[6]

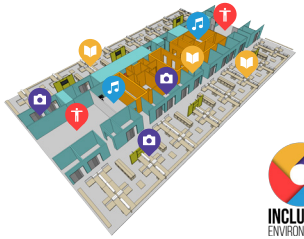
"Your team should dance while our team sings."[7]

We are already capable of realizing such habitats. They can be achieved technically. We can design and construct rooms and chambers with the physical attributes (dimensions, finishes, furniture) to support an expanded range of activities.[8] And they can be modified or "tuned" as needed.[9] Stimuli and conditions such as lighting, sound, temperature, color, aroma, tactility, configuration, and privacy can be adjusted according to preference/tolerance.[10] Distractions can be reduced. Affordances can be multiplied.

This is what it will mean to have inclusive environments. Environments that are truly designed for inclusion.[11]

This is more a matter of determination than design.

It now remains to determine who values the potential fruits of this inclusive habitat, and more importantly the people whom it supports, enough to capitalize the necessary investment.[12]



INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS

## Notes

[1] In a nod to le Corbusier's provocative architectural treatise *Vers une architecture*, published in French in 1923 and published in English under the [poorly translated] title *Towards a New Architecture* in 1927, I have employed a francophilic title and an intentionally terse and abrupt tone.

[1] At least the SAT is truthful enough to offer verbal and math scores, and only verbal and math scores. Although those scores have now been re-categorized as math and evidence-based reading and writing.

[2] Learning environments here are understood as both schools and offices. While schools contain rooms to support a much wider range of activities, the "working areas" of offices are generally arranged to support individual heads-down activities like reading and writing and then include provisions for working (read: meeting!) in groups of various sizes. Standard amenities (restrooms, break rooms, print/copy rooms, etc) are provided. And in more progressive cultures these include wellness rooms, gaming areas, gyms, full-service kitchens, bars, lounges, movie theaters, etc. But social activities and interactions that dare to bleed into the "working areas" are most often considered disruptive, distracting and intrusive.

[3] My earliest interest in these topics achieved some focus and discipline a few years ago when our firm embarked on a series of creative collaborations with a dance program at a local magnet school. [Someday, ask me about that collaboration.] Over the course of our interactions I gained insight into the main purpose of the program. It was no mere dance program. There was dancing to be sure, but the program engaged dance in order to instruct the students in kinesthetic learning. During the application and vetting process, students were not assessed for their ability to dance (much to the chagrin of those parents who had seen their children pursue ballet or tap or modern dance for years). Rather, they were being screened for their ability to learn kinesthetically. And then, as a portion of the curriculum, they were instructed in the techniques of kinesthetic learning, such as Anne Gilbert Greene's brain dance. Armed with awareness and skills, the students were able to improve their academic performance significantly. And, who are these students, prior to being identified (not diagnosed) as kinesthetic learners? Many are the students who fidget in the classroom. They are the students who do not and cannot sit still. They number among the students who are misunderstood. It is not the case that they are distracted, or inattentive, or insubordinate. It is the case that they are (desperately) attempting to engage and express their natural modality and that they lack the awareness and the techniques to do just that.

[4] I am aware that the categorization (and even the existence) of learning modalities is a matter of some debate. Specific classifications have been proposed by Fleming, Gardner, Kolb, and Honey and Mumford; to name a few. Here I generally align with Howard Gardner, whose framework I consider illustrative and operational. But this alignment is not immutable. I reserve the right to be convinced by and opt for another structure. [Feel free to make a nomination.] The analysis provided in the diagrams is however based on Fleming's VARK taxonomy as those were some of the most clarifying statistics available. [http://vark-learn.com/introduction-to-vark/research-statistics/, accessed 27 July 2019].

[5] As stated, I generally align with Gardner, but rather than include the solitary and social as separate modalities I consider them to be multipliers. In other words, each of the modalities – or various combinations of the modalities - can be executed as either a solitary or social function, by an individual or by a group.

[6] Again, I emphasize the decision to consider the solitary and social modes as multipliers. But I'll also seize the opportunity to muse on what it means to work. By "work", do we mean the effort spent to process information? To engage a modality during the time in which we process, consider, and/or formulate a response to the content or direction that has been received from the presenter? Or, do we aspire to support and engage the modality while the content is being received? What if someone connects more effectively while playing music, or sketching, or dancing? In other words, when does the "work" begin? Two additional points: 1. There is yet another question as to whether and how the presenter is obliged to consider/incorporate various modalities in the delivery of content. 2. The irony that this poster premiates the linguistic modality is noted.

[7] These maxims resonate with my conception of an office as a city; which I have developed elsewhere. Briefly, the city is a physical and cultural organism that results from nearly continuous collaboration and collective action. Its seminal proposition: You hunt while I gather, can then be magnified by Plato's notion of a city-state, most specifically the beneficial cooperation of the diverse natures and different occupations of its populace, and Adam Smith's more recent explication of the division of labor.

[8] We can specify and install the finishes, furnishings and equipment needed to support various activities. We can insulate the occupants of one room from the noise or vibration of an adjacent room. We can deploy systems and assemblies and finishes to affect/control acoustics and/or provide the requisite sound transmission coefficient (STC) rating. And we can integrate technology and control systems to regulate lighting, temperature and sound. This technical knowledge just needs to be ordered towards a higher purpose. In his Poetics Aristotle rightly cautioned that a technical error can undermine a noble aspiration. He warned of two kinds of error: something can be expressed poorly/wrongly; or its expression can be undermined by a technical gaff (leaving it to be perceived as unbelievable or infeasible). But he also implied the corollary: a technical response can underwrite an achievement when executed well.

[9] Some offices already offer curated spaces in which systems utilize sensors or beacons to detect occupancy and begin to adjust the room for known/archived preferences. Or the users can bark orders to a voice-activated digital assistant.

[10] In his Summa (Q75, A3, r obj 2) Aquinas posits that excessive strength of the sensible corrupts sense. And further, that while this never occurs in the intellect, the intellect requires the operation of the sensitive powers in the production of the phantasms. Which is to say that the senses are limited: we cannot hear sounds that are either too loud or too quiet, just as we cannot see if there is either too much or too little light; and, at least as importantly, the faculties of the intellect can be curtailed by the limitations of the bodily. To this can be added the observation that the range of tolerable sensations varies by individual. It is, therefore, important to be able to regulate, govern, and moderate stimuli. Let's resolve to use the technological capabilities of our systems and accessories to do that. [I am also intrigued by the possibility of using technology to provoke a "travel effect", by which I mean the quickening or perspicacity provoked either by exposure to the novel or re-entry; the re-introduction of the quotidian after a period of absence. These ideas await another poster.]

[11] This proposal reaches for something radical. In doing so, it is not my intension to dismiss or take for granted the (formerly) progressive strategies that have been incorporated (to varying degrees) into the workplace, e.g., flex hours, remote work policies, quiet areas, quiet hours, sustainability, resiliency, accessibility, universal design, biophilia, holistic wellness programs, technology that provides prompts to sit or stand or exercise or hydrate. For the record: yes, that too! That and more. Consider the progress that has been achieved in education. When I was in high school, the special education students still rode the "short bus" to their separate and unequal classrooms located on the far side of the building. We have come a long way in integrating those students into the general population. [Someday, ask me about "Bethany".] And yet the workplace lags far behind the school in including and supporting those individuals and benefiting from their gifts and skills and talents and perspective.

[12] This won't be inexpensive. It will require a significant capital outlay for specialized construction, furnishings, equipment and controls. Additionally, we will need to fund experimentation. Being "in beta" will require trial and error and remediation (renovation and remodeling). But I am confident that these expenditures will compare favorably to the costs related to employee dis/engagement. In 1937, Coase ascribed the advantage of a firm (when compared to a sole proprietor) to its being a confederation of individuals possessed of allied but complimentary skills and capacities. Not from a simple multiplication of a singular aptitude (strength in numbers), but from a constellation of contributory capabilities [a little, nay a lot, like "you hunt while I gather" x (Plato – Smith)]. A truly inclusive environment would not only unleash the greater potential of the current workforce, but it would also increase the census of those considered to be "productive and contributing members of society". This reminds that while we can, and should, do what we can to design and construct supportive environments, inclusion is an issue that extends well beyond the physical/built environment and into the domains of culture and behavior.

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