What Have We Learned That Should Be Carried Forward?

BACKGROUND

Beginning in May 2020, the LSC has been convening an informal group of academics and architects in a once-a-month, one-hour virtual roundtable. These were designed as an opportunity to "gather the sense of the community" as it responds to the challenges and opportunities emerging in the Covid-19 era. In January 2021, individuals were invited to share personal reflections about *lessons learned* and *what next.*

A. LONG-TERM IMPACT OF COVID ON SPACE REQUIREMENTS AND DESIGN

- Flexibility in all things highly desired.
- Remote learning has a remote chance of effectively replacing in-person learning in real places in the real world.

B. PLANNING

- COVID-19 has created new connections across campus—opening new lines of communication in planning.

- Building new facilities is not driving the future. It will be about achieving and transforming more use and value from existing campus buildings and grounds. Campuses will be scrutinizing and rethinking what already exists in spaces and resources, and building a future with that.

- In this time of COVID, we have observed that the redesign of physical learning space has not meant to universities/colleges what it once did, because the valued elements of design moved from innovation to necessity—from creative ambience to health-mindedness.

  We care less about creating space that is absent of authority to serve social distancing. No longer are we calling it collaborative space for learning and teaching, but rather space that fosters more individualism and safety. For now, what we have learned over this last decade of design exploration has given way to the return of the expert in front of the room, speaking to those in safety-net rows. We have learned to adapt to our situation.

- A question for architects: Given your experiences during these past many months, what would you say it means now to be a good campus-focused design professional? How would you finish this sentence:
  What I want to be known for is _____.

- One lesson we learned is that in order to survive and thrive, robust planning is essential so we can adapt and meet whatever change is inevitable. Now that we see some light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, it isn't a signal that anything will return to what some people considered to be "normal." Expectations have changed and some people really like the flexibility in teaching modes (for many reasons), in spite of the challenges such flexibility presented. This situation presents the opportunity to do what we know that works: engage the stakeholders; identify the use case; design, build, or renovate based on those results. Then, replicate what works and deliver a flexible learning ecosystem.

- As always, we must seek a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive process for planning—by provoking questions and facilitating conversations about learning from the perspective of others and by encouraging ourselves (planners and architects) not to use the pronoun "I."

- Colleges and universities have completely changed their mindset when it comes to space. They will be looking at "facility" through a new filter of:
  Do I need this space for this _____ (fill in the blank) anymore?

- Large auditoria will likely be left behind, and unfortunately many have them built out of concrete all over their campuses and will need to figure out how to reinvent this important real estate. Institutions were already beginning to rethink office and administrative spaces. The pandemic has accelerated this thinking.

STUDENTS/LEARNERS

- Over the past 11 months, learners have come to understand/appreciate the value of the physical campus as a place where they can:

  - Learn from faculty and peers in formal learning spaces by engaging in learning activities that are not as effectively done online.
  - Engage with their peers in communities and exercise their independence.
  - Engage in extracurricular activities.

  These items are what the students missed while living at home or off-campus and attending school remotely during the (ongoing) pandemic. While the orders to shelter at home helped learners appreciate the value of the physical campus, the spaces that accommodate all these activities will need to be retooled to the DEI issues that came forward in 2020.

DEI: DIVERSITY. EQUITY. INCLUSIVITY

- The systemic iniquities in our society can no longer be ignored. We can never go back to business as usual.

- Campuses will be weaving their current initiatives relating to inclusion and equity into the attention to physical spaces. The question institutions seem to want the most help with now is "how?" How can we ensure our physical spaces are promoting equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice? Many campuses are asking for help connecting the dots between digital, physical, and social spaces and belonging and inclusion—and, ultimately, student success.

- To see a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive process for planning—by provoking questions and facilitating conversations about learning from the perspective of others and by encouraging ourselves (the planners and architects) not to use the pronoun "I."

- To "never go back" is a mistake. We must go back! It is often the case that, as scientists, we want to solve the problem. It is what we were trained to do and conditioned to believe is the right thing to do—all the time. But, in doing so, we are sometimes in danger of rushing to a solution that has little chance of making a real difference in the ways we desire for it to make a difference.

  If we don't go back to pre-COVID STEM higher education to examine how learning spaces could ever have been designed or deemed appropriate without also being inclusive—or examine the role we played and the mindset we had when encouraging such spaces—then we are certain to create post-COVID learning spaces that will continue to advantage some students while excluding others. Hopefully, COVID has taught us that we should never hope to change what is happening around us if we don't first change what is happening within us.

- Yes, campuses will be weaving their current initiatives relating to DEI into their attention to physical spaces—but how to do that is the big question. We are getting better at asking questions about DEI that help us understand where and how our spaces are unwelcoming and divisive. Figuring out the next steps to address this—be it improving existing spaces or attempting to purposefully design spaces that avoid these problems—will be difficult, but essential. Approaching space design (and policy and practice in relation to spaces) with a critical perspective and seeking out the opinions of all types of users, but especially those previously marginalized, is a foundational step, but it must be iterative and ongoing. The problem and the solution can't be divorced from the larger context of the people in the spaces.

- Librarians have been sensitive to diversity, equity, and inclusion issues for many years, and have mainly manifested their concern with DEI through policies and practices relating to collections: ensuring that print, digital, and other media collections represent many cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. In addition, libraries can mount exhibits that feature various races and cultures and present public programs such as readings or cultural events that reflect diverse perspectives.

   The events of this past year may prompt many libraries to consider how their physical spaces themselves (and in conjunction with programming) can further enhance the library as a venue that is welcoming to all, and that raises awareness of the diversity of the campus community and diversity of perspectives in scholarly communication. While there have been some studies done of what makes libraries feel welcoming to students, more work is needed, both at a campus level and at a national level.

   It is important to understand, though, that different physical environments, cultural displays, etc., may appeal to some in one racial or ethnic group but not to others; one size does not fit all, including within one racial or ethnic group. Working with a student advisory committee and relevant campus groups should help inform what kinds of exhibits and programs might appeal to many students, faculty, and community members.

PHILOSOPHICAL

- We have learned to embrace uncertainty as a positive force.

- Our shared interest in the future sustainability and prosperity of higher ed depends on more understanding, utilizing, and leveraging the power of place to empower students, faculty, staff, and all higher ed stakeholders to better focus on their institution's:

  - Mission
  - Distinction
  - Pedagogy
  - Diversity, equity, and inclusion
  - Environmental impact
  - Enrollment and retention
  - Participation of surrounding communities
  - Participation of trustees, alumni, and parents

- In the wake of the pandemic that put practically all classes online, while facing a myriad of new challenges, educators will have unique opportunities to revisit the importance of physical learning spaces and their significance in learning. For higher education, the roles that learning spaces can play in creating effective learning communities, fostering inclusion, and promoting other institutional values seem especially salient in this moment.

- Essential questions underlie the design of all hybrid or blended learning experiences: what activities are best done (or only done) in a face-to-face learning environment? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each online and physical modality for achieving specific learning and teaching goals? Can spaces be designed to ensure quality experiences for both onsite and offsite learning? Such questions may never be in sharper focus.

- Being deprived of "business of usual" in higher education, administrative decision-making and architecture is differentially impacting modalities and disciplines. I hear administrators saying they were begging faculty for years to put their classes online, and now they're offering more online courses than ever. Yet a percentage of the college-age population is suffering because they do not have the personal income to pay for individual courses (in-person or online), so they are not enrolling. I've heard also that projects already in planning or construction are continuing, especially lab buildings, but that auditoria, classrooms, and performance hall projects are being cancelled or completely rethought. Specialized spaces for libraries are also being cancelled as capital projects.

This is a fascinating time with opportunities for university populations to reconfigure themselves as they come back together in physical spaces. While there might not be the same budget for architecture, architects and academic leaders will need to engage around evaluating the expenditure of limited budgets to craft spaces where diverse voices are heard, and where the progressive and values-based discussions held on university campuses can continue and evolve.

Architects will need to think even more creatively to make limited budgets go further to stem the spread of future disease through passive "low-tech" technologies and materials that cost less and do more. Sustainability and resource-efficiency will become increasingly important. The importance of colleges and universities as a place for creative thinking will only increase.