Art and Space: Impacting the Workplace

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**The Communicative Power of Art**

Art in its various forms and applications has always been a part of the human experience. Art can be intrusive, thought provoking, or simply beautiful. Although art comes in many different styles and forms, art continues to capture our imagination. Perhaps art embodies our cultural ideals and our collective humanity. As a striking expression of humanity, art possesses the unique ability to uplift and engage. According to H. R. Rookmaaker (1994), “Art always shows what man – the artist and the group to which he belongs, the time in which he lives – sees and experiences as relevant, as important, as worthwhile” (p. 236). On a smaller scale, could art, in turn, move past mere comments on the global social climate and into declarations of desired ideas and moods within the microcosm of the workplace? Art used in this way can create physical workplace environments and influence subtle social contexts giving the opportunity for employers to communicate to their workers what they see as relevant, as important and as worthwhile.

By its innate ability to transcend words, art is a powerful means of communication. Unlike verbal communication, art as a visual stimulant allows the messages of the artwork to reach deeply into the reservoirs of personal experience without the complication of semantics. Image is a universal language making art increasingly able to touch and move the hearts of humankind. The universality of image is most evident in the field of photography. Treasured photographs of late loved ones quickly become priceless symbols of memories. Even photographs of strangers can depict a dire plight more clearly than words. One such photograph has become the icon of the Great Depression. Entitled “Migrant Mother,” the photograph shot by Dorothea Lange pictures an anxious, impoverished mother with two younger children and a baby
in her arms. The two younger children are turned away from the camera resting one on each of the mother’s shoulders. With furrowed brow, the mother gazes into the distance while one hand rests lightly under her chin. In becoming an icon of the Great Depression, “Migrant Mother” communicates the hardships that rested heavily on the families of the Great Depression. Roy Stryker, the head of the Resettlement Administration photography section in which the photograph was first printed, stated, “She has all the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too. A restraint and a strange courage. You can see anything you want to in her. She is immortal” (Hairman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 55). Such is the nature of good art. Reaching into the wells of personal experience, art should communicate a strong message with intention and purpose.

Much of the intention and purpose within art is created through the process of design. As Stewart (2008) affirms, “Design creates a bridge between artistic intention and compositional conclusion” (pp. xix). Every piece of art can be broken down into the basic elements and principles of design. When dissected, two-dimensional art is simply a mix of lines, shapes, colors, textures and values that may represent a figurative image or an ambiguous abstraction (Stewart, 2008). The elements and principles alone are nothing more than the ingredients needed to prepare a gourmet, five-course dinner. A memorable gourmet experience is not executed through a random assemblage of ingredients. Culinary success requires knowledge of both the ingredients and creativity. Without creative experimentation, the "gourmet dinner" would likely resemble another fancy meal enjoyed elsewhere, and so too with art. An artist must work with a variety of materials and combinations to produce an artwork that is unique, inspiring and deliciously innovative. Through the carefully refined combination and application of these artistic ingredients, a specific mood can be created and thereby a message construed.
How Art Communicates

Consequently, the question is not whether a certain message can be communicated, but rather how and with what the message will best be communicated. In the artist-to-artwork-to-patron relationship, a message is being communicated through the art medium. From the artist's standpoint, success is determined by whether the artwork communicates what he or she intended. In order to communicate effectively, the artist must closely manage the design process with focus and intention. Successful start-to-finish design management begins with an intimate knowledge of the artist's chosen media. Only after 21 years of study and practice did the renowned Renaissance artist Michelangelo receive a commission to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling. After receiving the commission, Michelangelo spent a little over four years to complete the Sistine Chapel ceiling (Cox, 1914). Michelangelo’s life timeline is no exception. The artist himself was once quoted as saying, “If people knew how hard I worked to get my mastery, it wouldn’t seem so wonderful at all” (Fujishin, 2008, p. 49). Mastery and, subsequently, masterpieces require time, experience and planning. Although the message of an artwork can morph through the design and creation process, the skilled artist senses the changes and remains in control of the direction of the project throughout the entire process.

The skilled artist then needs only to decide the desired direction of the project. However slight, art always affects the space in which it is placed. The artist must not only decide the principles and elements to be used in the artwork but also consider both the space and context in which the artwork will be displayed. When creating art for a specific space, the artist must consider three main conditions. First of all, the artist must hold a clear idea of the environmental
context. From an exhibition designer’s standpoint, “Artifacts are interpreted afresh, translated as it were, through their new context. Scale, color, materials, lighting, sounds and graphics will all affect the way in which the display communicates to the visitor: the reading of the exhibited object will change according to its context and presentation” (Dernie, 2006, p. 2). Modern installation art takes the interaction of space, context, and artwork to the extreme. For instance, *The Forked Forest Path* is a site-specific installation created by Norwegian artist Olafur Eliasson. The installation features cut saplings closely interwoven to simulate the feel of a thick forest. As described on the exhibit website, “[When] viewers step into this environment, they experience its light, shadows, texture and distinctive scent as if it were real, while simultaneously knowing that it can’t be so” (“Land Between Us”, n.d.). Although two-dimensional artwork does not actually envelop the viewer, the artist can aim to create an equally impressive visual effect through considering and emphasizing the existing features of a space.

Second, an artist must select and place emphasis on specific elements and principles in the artwork. Of the basic two-dimensional design elements (which include line, shape, color, texture and value), color is by far the most complex, striking and emotionally evocative (Stewart, 2008). As a result, the addition of color can drastically alter a space. As Miller (1997) states, “An interior is not only a place for activities – for *doing* – it is also a place for *being*, and color in an interior can make being there a satisfying and enriching experience… Transcending function and practicality, color engages feeling before reason and intellect” (p. 7). Colorful art can add a splash of life to an otherwise lacking space. It can be used to create a calming effect or an exciting one. More so than any other design element, color is multi-faceted. A specific hue can have various tints and shades, which affect the hue’s impact on a space. Typically, cooler colors such as blue, green and purple recede from the eye while the warmer colors of red, orange and
yellow tend to advance (Stewart, 2008). Cooler colors have a more calming effect while warmer colors are exciting (Richards, 2005). Furthermore, color saturation must be considered in the design process. Low saturation colors typically have movement and energy while highly saturated colors attract attention and effuse energy (Stewart, 2008).

Finally, the principle of visual movement can add the needed energy to any space. In abstract art, visual movement is executed through the emphasis of both dynamic lines and contrast in shapes, colors, textures and values. Lines inherently connote movement (Stewart, 2008). Horizontal lines are the most stagnant, while diagonal and curvilinear lines are most dynamic (Stewart, 2008). When applied to a three-dimensional space, emphasis of vertical lines can both shorten a long “tunnel-like” hallway as well as visually raise a short ceiling (“Interior Design”, n.d.). Beyond the use of line, the use of contrast in shapes, colors, textures, and values can create depth to the space as well as increase visual movement.

**What Art Communicates**

Most of all, artwork improves an environment by adding a human touch to a space. Art by its very nature is human to the core. As a direct product of humankind, art has a wonderful way of breathing life into a space. A house becomes a home when it is decorated with the art and belongings of its inhabitants. A hospital becomes a haven of help instead of a waiting room of worry. In the influential 1984 study conducted by Robert Ulrich, empirical evidence showed that patients in view of nature requested less pain medication and recovered from gallbladder surgery one whole day earlier than those with a view of a brick wall (Sternberg, 2009). Since Ulrich’s groundbreaking study, further research has shown that patients in contact with art and art-making show lower levels of stress, hypertension and depression (State of the Field Committee, 2009).
Art can be both uplifting and therapeutic by its ability to communicate nonverbal messages to its viewers. Although the messages are not always one of relaxation and tranquility, the artwork still points to the presence of an actual person, the artist, residing behind the work. Art is a beautiful expression of our humanity. Through deep nonverbal communication, art speaks first to the feelings and then engages the intellect (Langer, 1977). As a result, art has the unique possibility to mirror and reinforce nonverbally what the inhabitants in an environment may be communicating verbally. For instance, a pediatric dentist’s office may advertise to be the best in the local area. If the patients walk into the office being greeted with playful, colorful artwork, the pediatric dentist nonverbally communicates sensitivity to the child’s needs and preferences before even personally meeting the child. Art surpasses verbal barriers and speaks the language of the heart. Furthermore, art can be used to evoke or confirm every emotion. The question, then, is how could the evocative potential of art be used in the workplace?

**Where Art Communicates**

Regardless of the context, interior design must be recognized as an important contributing factor to an employee’s well-being and satisfaction (Association of Professional Art Advisors, 2010). In the interior design process, art should be utilized to enhance any space. In a way entirely unique to art, artwork can and should bring identity to an environment. One such example is the United States Air Force, which has taken the designing of its bases seriously. In fact, the Air Force's Center for Engineering and the Environment has a detailed guidebook of standards and expectations for the design of its facilities and residential buildings. A few of the detailed descriptions include floor finishes, wall finishes, ceilings, furniture, window treatments and the installation of artwork. All of the specified guidelines are provided in an effort to “attract and retain quality personnel to sustain the Air Force” (“Interior Design”, n.d., p. 1). As shown by
the Air Force’s multi-chapter design guide, the Air Force clearly holds the visual impact of its facilities to a high standard. The Air Force design philosophy aptly states, "Well designed facilities satisfy users' needs, install pride in ownership and promote productivity in the workplace" ("Interior Design", n.d., p. 1).

What exactly are the needs present in the workplace? Of course, first come the basic utilitarian needs, which include adequate office space and the necessary supplies employees need to carry out their work, but beyond these serviceable needs, employees need sustaining job motivation. Traditionally, job motivation models have come from an individual need-satisfaction standpoint such as seen in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Slater & Bremner, 2003). The Social Information Processing (SIP) theory takes a slightly different approach. Instead of emphasizing individual characteristics and needs, the SIP theory claims that job satisfaction results as a combination of both personal assessments and information acquired from various social cues thereby producing a much more subjective development of personal job satisfaction (Crooke, 2008). Workers develop personal constructs in response to their social context (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

As a result, building intentional community in the workplace has become increasingly vital to employee satisfaction. The recent swell in global connectivity has in some ways produced a local disconnection. Now more than ever, employees desire “a sense of respect and a feeling of being connected to others” in the workplace environment (Veninga, 2003, p. 32). One simple way to ensure connectivity is to provide spaces that are conducive to conversation. For instance, a well-designed break room can encourage an atmosphere of connection as well as be a source of renewal and inspiration. When employees are positively connected, company loyalty and collaboration are two of the many results (Veninga, 2003).
Beyond intrapersonal connectivity among coworkers, what creates a positive work environment? According to Spitzig (2011), seven factors contribute to a good workplace environment which include a clear business direction and worker roles, quality senior management, meaningful work, consistency in workplace expectations, honesty, accountability, financial foresight and the most interesting of all, a “[blend] of tradition and innovation” (p. 12). A business should never recklessly throw out old products and processes. With an appreciation for tradition, a business should seek to improve and modify established products and services as well as develop entirely new products and processes. In this way, a fresh stream of ideas will constantly flow through the business, which creates an innovative environment (Spitzig, 2011). Creativity and individualism should be encouraged, but a business should never lose sight of the necessity of collaborative effort.

**The Workplace and the Human Aesthetic**

As the above factors interact to create a favorable workplace environment, so art can be used to contribute and reinforce similar values and ideas. Just as respect for employees is communicated through good management and the provision of meaningful work, respect can also be communicated through the physical environment of a business. Through careful attention to interior design and artwork, businesses can nonverbally emphasize the goals they have already made a priority through their actions. Few things are more enjoyable than feeling productive in a well-designed, creative space. American psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), has termed this state of “optimal experience” as “flow” (pp. 3-4). Flow is achieved when a person’s mind and body are so engaged in an activity that time all but melts away (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As an impetus towards “flow” experiences, artwork can be used to physically enhance the positive social environment already set by the business’s responsible and respectful actions
towards its employees. In order for the artwork to adequately serve a specific workplace, the business’ goals and achievements must be defined. Is the goal good customer service? Is it organization and efficiency? Is it innovation and creativity? Upon answering these questions, the most effective medium and style of art can be easily selected in order to communicate the desired message. In addition, the actual physical workplace environment will also determine the effectiveness and success of a specific piece. For example, if a business desires to communicate a sense of strength and innovation yet resides in a small business loft, a floor to ceiling piece of artwork would probably feel overwhelming and crowded. Instead of communicating strength and authority, the effect would be messy and suffocating. With the above considerations, an impressive piece of art especially designed for a specific space can move a business to a new level of professionalism (Spitzig, 2011).

In most businesses and subsequently workspaces, the art displayed seems very corporate and similar to standardized reprints. By the critical lack of attention to detail and authenticity, said businesses only communicate a cheap interest and a disregard for true innovation, the implication being that the business will settle for a façade of creativity with no actual regard for quality. Conversely, a business that intentionally communicates through the physical workspace environment displays sensitivity and dedication to the vision and standards set before workers (Veith, 1991).

**Liberty CAFÉ and the Human Aesthetic**

As an office with specific goals and purposes, the Center for the Advancement of Faculty Excellence (CAFÉ) office in Green Hall at Liberty University is seeking to improve its workspace to reflect its expansive responsibilities and overall workspace environment. Upon an interview with the CAFÉ director, Dr. David Nemitz, I learned that the CAFÉ office of Liberty
University is entrusted with the weighty responsibility of designing the entire curriculum for the many online programs offered that service over 50,000 students (personal communication, September 8, 2011). The CAFÉ houses three different teams in the same workspace, which work together to help Liberty University achieve its outstanding online offerings. The first team working in CAFÉ is the curriculum designers. These individuals write and design the online curriculum and make changes and improvements as determined. The next group is the editorial team, which searches the designed curriculum for formatting, semantic, and punctuation errors. Finally, the technical support team assists with the technicalities of the online aspect of the curriculum building. The tech team ensures that the edited curriculum is displaying correctly in the various browsers. Since Liberty’s online programs are both widely used and heavily reliant on technology, it is paramount that the tech team maintains consistency in functionality throughout the various curricula. Through the collaborating of these three teams, CAFÉ has assisted Liberty University in providing one of the best online programs nationwide.

In the actual workspace of the CAFÉ, key administrators of Liberty University frequent the offices resulting in a desire to reflect both the responsibilities and goals of the CAFÉ office in professional artwork. Furthermore, the mood of the artwork should be impressive, professional and colorful, maintaining the previously mentioned blend of innovation and tradition.

**Methodology**

After conferencing with Dr. Nemitz, I was able to tour the CAFÉ workspace. Upon entering the CAFÉ offices at Green Hall, stairs led up to the front wooden desk, which has a rich red undertone. The carpet is navy blue and the walls a neutral grey with a hint of beige. Past the front desks there are some stand-alone personal offices along the perimeter of the room. In the central aisle are six dull grey cubicles (See Appendix A). The rest of the office is accented with
navy blue. In the middle of the cubicle room there are three different sections of skylights. The natural light from these windows helps combat the fluorescent lighting. In addition, lights line the perimeter of the room and shine some warmer light onto the walls. The main work area is situated within the narrow middle space of the office. Around the perimeter of the narrow middle space are four longer walls that could easily carry artwork. Each wall is broken up into sections by doorways. The 176-inch southeast wall poses some potential interference due to a thermostat and fire extinguisher. The entire office has a ceiling height of 8 feet, and the cubicles rise about 4.5 feet from the ground, which visually shortens the available space in which artwork can be hung. As a result, a short height and wide panoramic sized artwork may be a good option with the exception of the wall that contains the thermostat and fire extinguisher.

The artwork should emphasize horizontal lines due to the lower ceiling and the visual shortening of the room by the height of the cubicles (“Interior Design”, n.d.). The navy blue trim strongly emphasizes the space’s vertical lines, which also works to shorten the visual height of the room. By emphasizing the horizontal lines through the use of 2 feet by 8 feet canvases as well as including strong horizontal in the artwork, I will add some visual height to the room. In addition, the strong horizontal emphasis will also work to tie the four different artworks together, naturally leading the eye around the room and connecting the four artworks.

The artworks should also contain a fair amount of color. Strong, rich hues will help to communicate strength and certainty. Rich hues will also bring life and interest to the currently neutral workplace. The actual color choice will be complicated. From my observation of various department and home furnishing stores, the standard for most artwork in many businesses is deep crimson reds, warm yellows and browns. Warm colors should be used to soften the fluorescent lighting and the stagnant nature of deskwork. Bright blues in combination with pinks, reds,
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oranges and browns will provide enough interest without being too flamboyant. Since Liberty University’s school colors are navy blue, red and white, variants of these colors may also provide a good theme while serving to reinforce the identity of Liberty University and subsequently the CAFÉ office.

The artwork should also create visual movement throughout the space. As previously mentioned, the CAFÉ office currently has very strong vertical lines through the many doorways, support beams and tall cubicles throughout the office. These verticals act in a way that visually shortens the height of the room. By emphasizing horizontal lines, the height of the room will increase while subsequently causing the sense of visual movement to decrease. Horizontal lines are the most visually stable while diagonal and curvilinear lines suggest the most movement (Stewart, 2008). Out of the two, curvilinear lines give a more organic essence to the artwork. Through the use of curvilinear lines, a feeling of familiar movement will nicely contrast with the stillness of deskwork.

Finally, the artworks will be completed using mixed media. Because of this, various textures will be used to add depth to the artworks as well as visual interest. Texture can be created through the use of different physical textures as well as the fabrication of visual textures with various media. Texture adds interest like no other element in art (Stewart, 2008). Highly textured artwork holds a wonder and curiosity that can be only satisfied by physically touching the artwork. Of course, this kind of behavior is taboo in most artistic circles rendering this desire unable to be fulfilled. Thus, the viewer is forever left with the wonder of textured work (Stewart, 2008). Although texture brings great depth to an artwork, texture can appear messy and disjointed if it is not properly controlled. In order to maintain a professional look, the textures
must be clean and well blended into the artworks. Softer textures will have a relaxing effect on
the eye while adding visual interest to the artwork.

Beyond technical aspects of the artworks to be created for the CAFÉ, the aim of the
artworks is to improve the office environment and thereby the morale of employees. As
previously mentioned, the artworks will be a blend of tradition and innovation. Each of the
artworks will depict a different season: spring, summer, autumn, or winter. Traditionally, the
seasons have symbolized the different stages of life (Kammen, 2004). In spring, the earth is
bursting forth with new life. Summer is a season of playful youth and work, while autumn is
often seen as a time of reaping consequences, whether good or bad. Finally, winter is a month of
stillness and sleep. As the seasons change with time, so does the life of each human being. Each
season holds its trials as well as its joys. Subsequently, the CAFÉ has the unique ability to touch
the lives of people in all seasons of life. Online education is available to young adults, middle
aged, and senior citizens. Furthermore, many online students take care of families at home
increasing the influence of the CAFÉ to the lives of young children whose parents are training
for online degrees.

Admittedly, the four seasons is a very traditional subject for artwork, just as seeking
education is a traditional life choice in the United States. As previously mentioned, the artworks
will be highly innovative mixed media paintings of sorts, just as online education is new and
innovative. Thus, the artwork will also serve to reinforce the values and goals of the CAFÉ
through representation and abstraction.

**Discussion**

In order to develop a cohesive style, I worked out many design and stylistic issues on a
same-sized canvas with a different subject. Although this painting did not thematically represent
the seasons, it did combine a sense of realism and abstraction in both my rendering and use of color and texture. I experimented with a strict color palette and heavy application of paint, which allowed much of the canvas to show through the painting. I also developed a style of layering colors that forces the eye to visually blend at a distance, but maintain interest from a detailed perspective.

After numerous iterations of the seasonal compositional theme, I settled upon variations of rolling landscapes with a larger tree as the focal point (See Appendix B). Changes in the color scheme and subtle changes in the actual landscape provided enough interest while maintaining a unified appearance to the seasonal series. For each painting, I carefully planned the color scheme to reflect the mood and temperature of the season while maintaining an element of warmth to benefit the CAFÉ offices. For spring, I used a light green, light blue, warm brown and a lively pink to capture the fresh feeling of spring. For summer, I used a cooler green, hot yellow-orange, warm blue and navy blue to portray the heat of the sun. For autumn, I incorporated creamy yellows, mustard yellow, burnt orange, red, eggplant purple and warm brown to capture the beauty of fall. Finally, for winter, I utilized pastel colors: light pink, light blue, lavender, as well as dark blue-green, white and brown to capture the simplicity of winter. Color was crucial to adding interest to the seasonal series as well as adding warmth to the CAFÉ workspace.

Another key element in the seasonal series was the application of texture. Each painting was created using thick application of paint and a scumbling technique. Scumbling is a type of dry brush painting in which the artist almost scrubs the paints onto the canvas, creating a rough textured look. As a result, paint was not smoothly blended as previously predicted but layered, allowing each carefully chosen color to hold its space. Due to the rough textured approach, the paintings have a simultaneous abstract and realistic quality.
The final key quality of my seasonal series is abstraction. While the paintings still represent recognizable landscape features, the landscapes focus more on the interplay of color and texture rather than the exact rendering of environmental features. Due to the large scale of these paintings, photorealism was not a viable option. However, the forced abstraction presented the potential for more innovative solutions. In the abstraction of the landscapes, increased freedom was provided in the choice of color schemes, which in turn allowed the colder seasons to be rendered in a way that showed visual warmth.

Using these three qualities, my composition for each piece had both similarities and subtle differences. For spring, the background featured a mountain with subsequent smaller mountains in the middle ground and rolling hills in the foreground. On the right middle section of the foreground stands a large blossoming tree. For summer, the background, middleground and foreground all feature rolling hills. In the foreground, a large tree in its full foliage stands before subsequently smaller trees in the middleground and background. For fall, perhaps the most intricate painting of the series, a large mountain looms to the left of the painting in the background followed by rolling hills in the middle ground and a plain area in the foreground. Again, the constant tree shatters the visual plain of the foreground with swirling leaves in the wind. To counterbalance the weight of the large mountain, dark clouds rest in the sky to the right of the unfailing tree. Finally, the winter scene presents snowy rocky slopes in the background, middleground and foreground. This time, the tree, an evergreen, interrupts the lonely slopes and presents an harbinger of spring to come. The four paintings are currently hung in the CAFÉ offices in the open area that houses the cubicles. The paintings are positioned high on the wall and move in seasonal order clockwise around the space (See Appendix C).
Conclusion

As Veith (1991) aptly states, “Art is inherent in every true vocation; creativity is at the essence of the human capacity to work, to be productive, and to serve society” (pp. 31-32). The human need for aesthetic transcends an individual’s private space to encompass the individual’s public and professional environment. Through creative expression, art adds elements of warmth and subtle visual communication between employers and workers, and in a place were communication is vital to success and collaboration, art can be a visual stimulus to increase morale and productivity. In order to shift the aspect of work from duty to delight, art is a necessary component to creating a healthy, happy and productive workplace. Regrettably, art and workplace design has not garnered much attention either professionally or academically. Additional research is needed to better understand the connection between art and professional workplace. To be sure, the research conducted here touches the tip of the iceberg on the interplay between the physical environment of the workplace and the overall positive work environment. Indeed, the power of art in the workspace lies largely untapped. If creativity is the cornerstone in our ability to work (Veith, 1991), our physical workplaces should play part in engaging, inspiring, and ultimately motivating us on the job.
References


Appendix A

Figure 1. The entrance of the CAFÉ office before the addition of paintings.

Figure 2. Another view of the CAFÉ office just past the bookcase.
Appendix B

Figure 3. Spring, 2ft x 8ft, acrylic paint

Figure 4. Summer, 2ft x 8ft, acrylic paint

Figure 5. Autumn, 2ft x 8ft, acrylic paint and tissue paper

Figure 6. Winter, 2ft x 8ft, acrylic paint and tissue paper
Appendix C

Figure 7. View from just behind bookcase of the CAFÉ office with installed paintings.

Figure 8. View of Summer and Autumn from across the workspace.
Figure 9. View of Spring from the rear workspace.