VIEW POINT

Design for life

The concept of creating 'generative spaces' is leading to a significant evolution in the approach to healthcare design, according to Heather Fennimore of ergonomic design specialist Humanscale. Here she explains the thinking behind the idea

In 2003 forward-thinking American architect Wayne Ruga formally defined his long-standing 'generative space' concept for designing environments that both systemically and sustainably improve lives. Today the Caritas Project, the US-based non-profit organisation founded by Ruga, works globally to pioneer a new and more desirable and healthier future for individuals, organisations, and communities by developing and creating more generative spaces.

The generative space concept

In essence, generative space is creating 'a place to flourish' – one where users are able to state, in their own terms, that their lives have been improved as a result of their experience in that space.

Generative spaces represent the next generation of designing for health and it is a methodology that is applicable to all aspects of our designed environments, beyond healthcare.

Simply put, the design of a generative space requires the designer to understand what a user requires to improve their life, often involving gestalt psychology to enable a user to harness their experience to inform the design.

Any experience is the combination of the social and physical, which is a new approach for many design professionals, as historically the physical design and aesthetic has been the priority.

A generative space will deliver measurable improvements. For example: to comply with requirements for sustainability, productivity in work and work outcomes, retention of employees, minimising staff absenteeism, and improved patient outcomes, it's necessary to begin with a baseline metric. Using generative space should then demonstrate improvements beyond the baseline that continue over time.

Applying design research at Macmillan

After Ruga defined and developed 'generative space' for designing environments to improve lives, he initiated the Leading by Design Research Project (LBD) under the auspices of The Caritas Project.

The LBD project works with individuals around the world who learn about generative space from Ruga and apply their learning to their lives, projects, organisations, and communities.

One of the LBD participants in Simon Henderson, formerly head of cancer care environments for Macmillan. As Simon Henderson experimented with a variety of initiatives to create generative space at Macmillan, he developed the Macmillan Quality Environmental

Mark to advance the quality of cancer care with the healthcare provider organisations throughout the UK.

Today, Macmillan's Quality Environment Mark (MQEM) is delivering its purpose and was accredited in 2016 by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) as an official information source for their inspections.

Subtle shift

Creating generative spaces is not difficult – but it does require a subtle shift in the traditional way of thinking that many architects and design professionals have learned about in school and practice.

Generative spaces require an entirely pragmatic and practical approach, working with individuals to develop environmental solutions that support the advancement of users' aspirations – from their perspective.

As stated earlier, generative space is one that creates 'a place to flourish.' It really is quite simple: if the user says they are flourishing, the space is a generative one, conversely if the user cannot claim to be flourishing, the space is simply not a generative one for them.

Active listening is crucial

The more active, 'listening' design professionals can do, to support the user requirements, the more chance they have to be 'accountable collaborators.' The process requires investment in the front-end of the design process, playing back the user feedback so a mutual understanding of requirement is reached, before the physical design solution event starts.

Although the concept of generative space has it roots in healthcare there is much that can be applied to all aspects of architectural design, peoples lives and the varying environments they use.

Creating life-enhancing spaces that make individuals feel better and happier will lead to more productive people, whether children and teachers in a school classroom, employees in an office or healthcare-givers and their patients – the end result of a generative space can only be positive. ■

Heather Fennimore is a Partner and President of Global Healthcare & IT Distribution with Humanscale, Chair of the Scientific Advisory Committee for Cornell University's Atkinson Center for Sustainable Futures and a member of the Hoover Council at Stanford University