

Redesign Your Workplace

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A Being Human Festival Exhibit
by Allison Huang



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Goals of this exhibit

- 1) Discover the relationship between how you work and your physical environment
- 2) Examine whether your workplace is designed to meet your needs
- 3) Exercise creativity in the form of tangible techniques you can take home with you

Acknowledgements

This exhibit was designed and organized by Princeton University student Allison Huang '21. The exhibit is part of the international **Being Human Festival of 2019**, with the U.S. hub hosted by the Humanities Council of Princeton University. The public celebration brings together local organizations, including universities, museums, galleries, libraries, schools, and businesses, to engage with research across the humanities.

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Allison Huang '21 is a junior in the History Department pursuing a certificate in Applications in Computing. She enjoys exploring interdisciplinary questions such as the one that frames this exhibit: What is the relationship between physical space and our ability to work well? On campus, Allison is an active member of Princeton Christian Fellowship. You may reach her at ah25@princeton.edu.

What is Creativity?

Consider that the brain is an active system, where information changes the brain which then receives future information differently. Rain falling onto a landscape is an example. The rain eventually gets organized into streams and rivers. (Edward de Bono, *Serious Creativity*).

To be creative is to cut away from these self-organizing patterns, to “go against the grain.”



A view of earth's streams, NASA

Why be creative?

- » **Be open to experience.** Creative people have imagination and curiosity when considering new ideas, sensations and feelings.
- » **Tolerate ambiguity.** Creative people are more comfortable with situational uncertainty because they trust they can use creativity to make the best of the situation.
- » **Get past the feeling of being “stuck.”** Sometimes, people feel like the situation they are in will never change. Creativity helps a person think of new ways to solve a problem.
- » **Creativity is self-rewarding.** Dopamine levels rise in the brain’s pleasure centers both when humans are dreaming and when humans are being creative. This serves as reward and reinforcement that keeps dreams– and ideas– flowing (Shelley Carson, *Your Creative Brain*).



Space and Mental State

"I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wallpaper. Perhaps because of the wallpaper. It dwells in my mind so!" Charlotte Gilbert Perkins, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

In the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Charlotte Gilbert Perkins plays with the notion that one's physical environment can reflect one's mental wellbeing; in it, the protagonist imagines the wallpaper tearing, mutating, smearing yellow streaks on her skin and clothing, reflecting her increasing mental instability as a result of being involuntarily confined to bed rest. Perhaps there is more to this notion that physical environment and mental state are intimately wound up together than literary metaphor.

How does your physical environment affect the way you work?

Sara Varlander, *Individual Flexibility in the Workplace: A Spatial Perspective*

affordance /n/ : a quality of an object, or an environment, that allows or inhibits an individual to perform certain actions

The notion of affordances suggests that the environment makes itself available to certain uses while constraining others. For example, a stairway affords walking more than it does sleeping.

Spatial layouts can demarcate social roles and define relationships and thereby predispose individuals to act and perceive actions in certain ways rather than others.

For example, glass walls for conference rooms might make the company culture more transparent. Or glass walls might reinforce an insider-outsider feeling, where someone who is not in the meeting feels like an "outsider" because they see their colleagues having a meeting that they weren't invited to.

Case Study: d.school

The Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford, commonly known as the d.school, is a design thinking institute based in Stanford University.

“When you walk into one of our classes, it’s impossible to tell who’s teaching and who’s learning. Innovation thrives on this kind of equality. With the boss or professor at the head of the room, it feels like a ‘sage on stage.’ People are reluctant to share their ideas.”

“We want our teams to get up and try stuff, not sit around and talk in long meetings, so we make seating uncomfortable and tables too small.”

Read more in *Make Space: how to set the stage for creative collaboration* by Scott Doorley and Scott Witthoft.



@the_d.school, flickr

Today you will use creative techniques to explore the relationship between your physical work environment and your ability to work effectively

Problem Finding (Asking the Right Questions)

The world is of course teeming with dilemmas. But dilemmas must be posed and formulated in fruitful and often radical ways if they are to be moved toward solution. The way the problem is posed is the way the dilemma will be resolved. J. W. Getzels, *Problem Finding: A Theoretical Note (1979)*

You and your work partner are always at odds. He tends to misrepresent your work during all-hands meetings even though the two of you meet beforehand to discuss what he will say. *What is his problem? You wonder. Is he just forgetful or thick-skulled?*

Rather than lingering on this unproductive thought, you decide to problem-find. *Does he understand what I say when we meet? If he didn't understand what I was saying, would he ask for an explanation?*

You continue. *Are the details that I ask him to present too technical for an all-hands meeting anyway? How can I present my work in a more palatable way for my work partner?* By problem-finding, you can think of viable solutions to fix this communication issue between you and your work partner.

Divergent Thinking (Brainstorming)

The problem with brainstorming is that everyone thinks they already do it. They overlook the possibility that brainstorming can be a skill, an art, more like playing the piano than tying your shoes. Tom Kelley, *The Art of Innovation*

Setting aside a space to brainstorm— and I mean, really brainstorm, without getting caught up in the real life constraints— can get us to consider new ideas that we might not have thought of before.

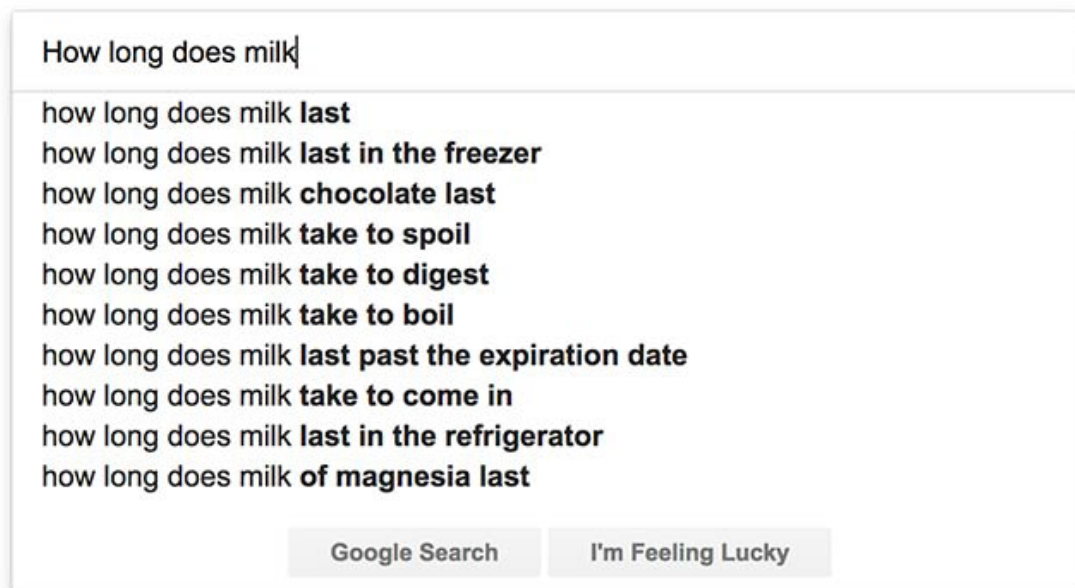
The purpose of Divergent Thinking, colloquially called “brainstorming,” is to generate as many original ideas as possible and open the mind up to all possibilities, even seemingly

impossible ones, without getting bogged down on whether something is intelligent or realistic.

Prototyping (Trying Out Your Ideas)

In the creative life, it's not enough to just "have" ideas. You need to make good ideas a reality. You continually externalize your thoughts— and not just the polished, finished ones. You get even your rough-draft, raw ideas out into the world in some physical form, as quickly as possible. Making— a draft, a drawing, a prototype, a plan— helps you fuse your ideas, choose among them, and build on what you like. Keith Sawyer, *Zig Zag: The Surprising Path to Greater Creativity*

In the workshop, you will have the chance to make your ideas real with physical materials in space.



As you refine your search terms in Google, you are engaging in a kind of **problem-finding**.

