



PHOTO: AERIAL VIEW OF THE GARDEN OF MY HOME.

CHAPTER 6

UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTIONS OF SPACES

*“EVEN A COMMON, ORDINARY BRICK ...
WANTS TO BE SOMETHING MORE THAN IT IS.
IT WANTS TO BE SOMETHING BETTER THAN IT IS.”*

LOUIS KAHN

We shape our spaces and our spaces, in turn, shape us.

We should actively invest our energy and attention into designing the environment around us. If we don't, we miss out on the benefit of these spaces helping us function better and more effectively. A simple way of explaining this is by considering your desk at work. Until you clear off your work desk and make it tidy, you simply cannot experience the impact this tiny footprint of less than half a square meter has on your ability to think and focus at your best.

Spaces where we dwell and operate every day – including where you are sitting right now as you read this – are not random spots where you happen to exist. Each space can allow you to be your best

self, performing at your optimum. An operating theatre should not be just a space that happens to have some medical machinery and a large hanging spotlight above a metallic bed on wheels.

A place that is a bit of everything, in my view, becomes nothing. This is aligned with the broad objectives and principles of self-care. Just as when we try to multitask and perform many roles we do not achieve optimally, a space that has too many roles does not work in our favour. The moment certain qualities in a space become too fragmented the space loses its original intended use, so much so that it doesn't perform any purpose at all. When spaces perform and function too flexibly, meaning they do not have a dedicated purpose, they don't function effectively anymore.

For example, if we agree that the bedroom is a place to recharge, a place to recuperate and be our most intimate and innermost person, it must be that. It has to be just a place of rest, or it will exist in many different forms and try to work in a myriad of roles. We need to recognize that each space within the home or work environment has a fairly narrow set of purposes. There are key needs for some of these key spaces, and this awareness will trigger your thoughts to evaluate how each of the spaces surrounding you influence your day.

Studies have suggested that the use of the dining table as a space for office work during the pandemic was linked to an increase in burnout. Our minds use spatial cues to associate activities to the spaces that

we use and interact with, and working from home has introduced to us a new challenge: the demarcation of work and personal boundaries.³² At the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, it was not possible to have prepared in advance for the sudden implementation of working from home, and many people did not have the opportunity to consider the best way for them to function while doing so. Many experiments have been tried and lessons learned as a consequence, and I have been involved in projects to design bespoke solutions for working-from-home spaces that do not necessitate the use of spaces dedicated to other purposes, such as the dining room or the bedroom. This separation of spatial functions is important for both physical and mental well-being.³³

Such observations can stimulate your personal insights to come up with ideas about how each space can work better for you personally. You will be able to exercise a greater sense of presence during each of your daily activities and routines. In particular, you will be able to achieve quality time with yourself and your loved ones.

YOUR BEDROOM

Almost all architects and spatial designers are taught that in modernism there is one basic rule: form follows function. In simple terms, this stipulates that the shape and physical properties of a building or space are to allow effective inhabitation,

as well as to facilitate the way that that space is prescribed to be used.

The second principle is less is more, which relates to reducing unnecessary visual clutter of materials, design qualities, and information. Such clutter happens if one is not focused on the true essence of the space.

I adhere to these two principles, but probably in a more adjusted and appropriate way.

Let's talk about sleeping, for example. Sleeping is one of a human being's vital daily activities. We each spend around one-third of our entire lifetimes asleep, and the function of sleep is for the body to readjust, recalibrate, recuperate, and to be ready for the non-sleep two-thirds.³⁴

Obviously, sleeping is an important activity for the human body and brain. And in modern times, we do this in the sanctuary of our bedroom. During our cave-dwelling times, sleep would have occurred in a part of the cave where the family unit slept and restored energy. This part of the cave would have to be well protected to prevent unpegged danger or threats.

Have you ever considered whether your bedroom is working for you? Does it make you feel safe and secure, and does it exude serenity? Does your bedroom serve its purpose of letting you be yourself while also recharging you for the non-sleeping hours of your lifetime?

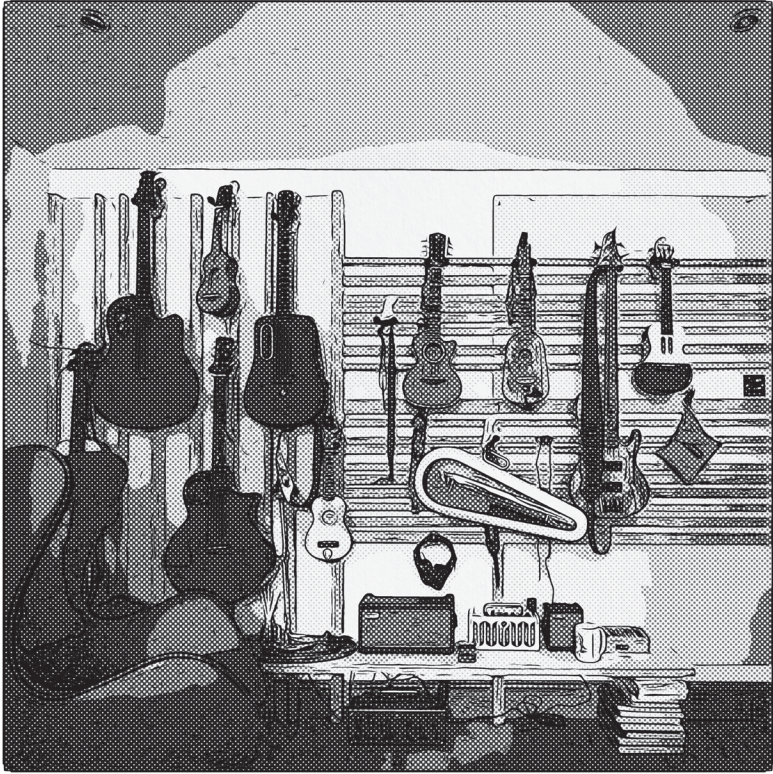


PHOTO: MUSIC LIFTS THE SOUL, AND BENEFITS MY WELL-BEING.
MY STRING INSTRUMENTS COLLECTION.

My own bedroom is my cave. The wall that I see when I wake up is covered with a large composition of three printed screens showing the woodlands nearby, where I have spent much time meditating and re-learning to be myself. Lining another wall are all my musical instruments, a collection that I have built up over recent years, on a functional hanging surface for this equipment I use regularly. Metaphorically, the printed woodlands photo and

the wall of ukuleles and guitars are no different to cave paintings I would have made if this was really my cave made of rock.

Because this is my personal space, it is also constructed with a warm tone of materiality: birch ply. Almost every single piece of furniture is designed and handcrafted by me: self-built items are more pleasurable to use, but also difficult to replace. So, the tone of well-being embedded in my design advocacy is also conscious of sustainability.

The wall with windows is installed with motorised blackout blinds. This has been one of the best investments, equipment-wise, in my home. It means that I can, at the press of a button, turn the space into one that is almost pitch dark, allowing me to be attuned to my natural circadian rhythms. Darkness welcomes melatonin, leading to sleep time, and light triggers cortisol's release so that we become fresh and ready in the mornings.



DRAWING: MY DAUGHTERS POSING FOR A MOCK UNHAPPY MEALTIME LOOK.

HAPPY MEAL

What, to you, is a happy meal? Is it about the food, the actual taking in of nutrition? Perhaps it is a sumptuous breakfast, a hearty fry-up, or something that is lean and part of a well-managed diet. Or, maybe, you will be thinking of McDonald's, but if we think of a meal that is happy, we are thinking about the environment or the ambience, the people we are with, together with the conversations and the interactions, the smiles, laughter, and perhaps even the arguments or the differences of opinion, the exchange of ideas and debates that we have over food.

Do you agree that good kitchens make happy meals? Do you believe that the quality of the design and the way that a space functions has a direct influence and impact on how we make and enjoy a meal? For me, the kitchen is the precursor to the dining table. The preparation of a meal, even the laying of the table, is akin to a ritual. Whenever possible, I love having all kinds of friends over for a meal, no matter how simple it is. I see making a meal as a celebration, a blessing of being able to dwell in moments of creating food. The flavours of what I make are seasoned with the conversations we have while making the meal. This means that I am a keen advocate for open kitchens, or at least those that have an opening that connects the kitchen to where the others might be: for example, sitting at a modified bar counter. In my view, the visual treat of being able to participate in the activity of preparing food is

great entertainment. Pardon the pun, but I call this a feast for both the host as well as the guests.

DESIGNING YOUR MEMORIES

Is your dining room dedicated to the act of eating? In the modern lifestyle that we lead, the dining room is often associated with catching up on the news, spending time on social media and online shopping, and digital device time.

If we were to strip away these forms of distraction, we would understand that the dining room can serve us emotionally and physically. The interactions over a dining table lead to building memories, by physically connecting with, interacting and bonding with our family and friends.

Often, we do not pay attention to these attributes of the key spaces of our homes, and consequently, they become just transient moments of our everyday time. I think that, for us to have self-care and self-love, to be fully present, and to use every single moment when we breathe and we are alive, these seemingly transient spaces can indeed work for us in amazing ways.

I remember an acted-out experiment in *The Social Dilemma*, whereby a family was told how much of their mealtimes were being usurped by technology. As a way to try and highlight this point, the mother of the family bought a unique jar that

had a time-based lock integrated into it. The family agreed that everyone would put their mobile phones into this jar for the next 30 or 45 minutes, during which the family was to spend time together to eat their family meal. Even though all of the devices were set to silent mode, they still vibrated. According to the experiment, the daughter was so uncomfortable that eventually, after having restrained herself for quite a while, she took the jar and smashed it, simply to be able to see which of her friends was messaging her, either on social media or directly.

This is an illustration of how powerful the psychology of user experience and user interface design is in our technology and gadgets. There is a great deal of insight and thoughtful expertise placed into the designing of the vibrations, the ring tones or the graphics of the little icons that we receive. These carefully assessed and intelligently designed interfaces and details are intended to compel us to react. In fact, they trigger the reptilian brain, the part of our brain that is a direct impulse without rational processing or evaluating, to instinctively respond.

Being aware of this can give us back a lot of power. It can give us the opportunity to deliberately reduce the way that such details can influence our mind space. It gives us the chance to recalibrate and make decisions to control how much attention and mind space and time we give to a device.

A personal story I want to share is one that is deep in my memory. I spent very little time with my

grandfather, but I occasionally had breakfast with him. Being a migrant to Singapore from China, he had worked as a labourer and had gone through very tough times, so he was frugal. His typical breakfast at the coffee shop would involve a half-boiled egg, maybe a slice of toast and a cup of coffee. I remember vividly the way that he would break the half-boiled egg into the saucer that comes with the coffee cup. He would slurp down the half-boiled egg together with some pepper and soy sauce and follow it by pouring into the same saucer the coffee to wash down the egg. I was told that he did this because of how precious the protein from the egg was. He would make sure not to waste any of the egg and ate every little bit of it that was left on the saucer.

I mention this memory to illustrate how the time spent over a meal is, to a degree, very little about the actual consumption of the food, and more about the emotional story and the experience of being together at the dining table. Some of these memories that might not be extremely significant as events are embedded very deep in our memory banks. In the moments when we are quiet and reflect, we can recall some of these events which are significantly inscribed as part of our childhoods. This is why I encourage anyone reading this book to enjoy being present in every space and time. Be present at this very moment, in whatever you are doing.

The Chinese word for “present” is 礼物. This refers to the alternative meaning of the word “present”

as a “gift.” Borrowing this idea, you can see that by being present, you are dedicating a present to your future self. This is a neat idea to encourage ourselves to be fully present.

For the spaces around us to work better, we have to learn how to curate the functions within these spaces. The ability to curate must be learned along a personal journey; it is not a taught exercise. The stories I share about my own personal spaces are intended to communicate the methodologies I have tested out, for you to supercharge your own learning and experimental process.

We need to understand that space is just a medium or a conduit to achieving certain root functions or purposes. Each space should also serve the objective of uplifting and enhancing, holistically, our states of well-being. By simplifying the spaces around us and dedicating certain spaces to serve only a selected range of functions, we are helping ourselves to form productive habits.

One example could be the way that we might store the cookie jar on the top shelf of a cupboard. Keeping it in a slightly more remote part of the kitchen is important to someone who is trying to abstain or trying to cut down on the consumption of biscuits and sweet things. It is counterintuitive to have the cookie jar nearby if you’re trying to not eat cookies, and it is more conducive to those efforts to store the cookie jar where it requires more effort to access. Experiments and analysis have

demonstrated that this is far more effective than just allowing yourself to have easy access to them.

Designing spaces, and making them work better for us, is simple. How we can focus the moments that we have to be more productive, at any single point in time, relies on our ability to be in a state of well-being.

As a reminder, we are never in stasis, and in every single moment of our living day, there are opportunities for us to observe how we might improve our present day, as well as the following. By making these decisions and making the small tweaks, we move forward in the tiniest way. It's a small but big adjustment, and it gets us closer to our spaces functioning in a way that suits our lifestyles better.

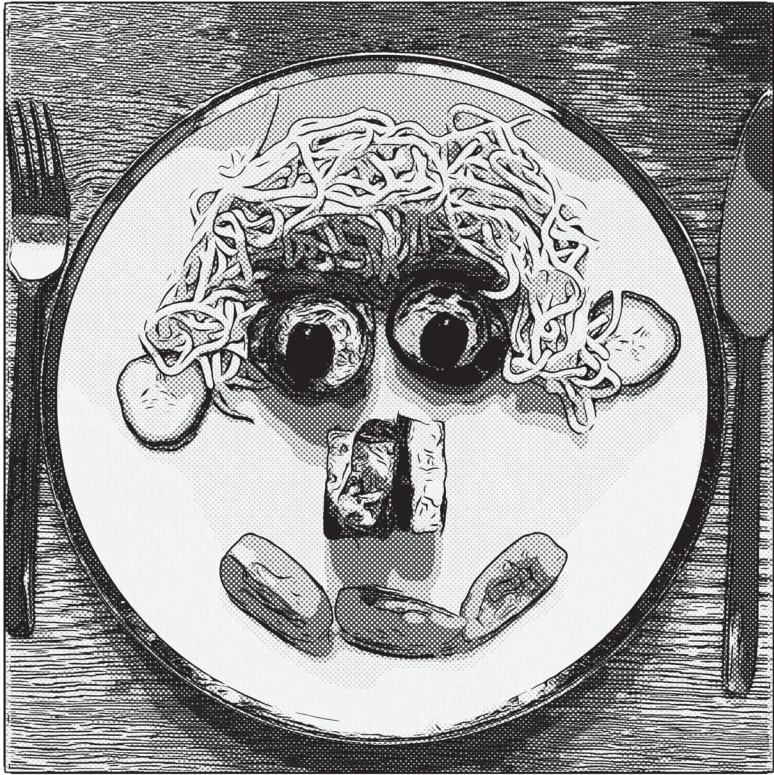


PHOTO: HAPPY MEALS TO CELEBRATE AND
INJECT HAPPY INGREDIENTS INTO THE MAKING OF
MEALS FOR THE FAMILY CHILDREN.

Source: Author's own collection