

HIDDEN ZONES IN AMERICAN OFFICES

Because there is so little information on what it is that produces these subjective feelings, I conducted a series of "non-directed" interviews on people's reactions to office space. These interviews revealed that the single most important criterion is what people can do in the course of their work without bumping into something. One of my subjects was a woman who had occupied a series of offices of different dimensions. Doing the same job in the same organization in a variety of offices, she noted that these offices provided different spatial experiences. One office would be adequate; another would not. Reviewing these experiences with her in detail brought out the fact that, like many people, she had a habit of pushing herself away from her desk and leaning back in her chair to stretch her arms, legs, and spine. I observed that the length of the away-from-desk shove was highly uniform, and that if she touched the wall when she leaned back, the office struck her as too small. If she didn't touch the wall, she considered it ample.

Based on interviews of over one hundred American informants, it would appear that there are three hidden zones in American offices:

1. The immediate work area of the desktop and chair.
2. A series of points within arm's reach outside the area mentioned above.
3. Spaces marked as the limit reached when one pushes away from the desk to achieve a little distance from the work without actually getting up.

An enclosure that permits only movement within the first area is experienced as cramped. An office the size of the second is considered "small." An office with Zone 3 space is considered adequate and in some cases ample.

Kinesthetic space is an important factor in day-to-day living in the buildings that architects and designers create. Consider for a moment American hotels. I find most hotel rooms too small because I can't move around in them without bumping into things. If Americans are asked to compare two identical rooms, the one that permits the greater variety of free movement will usually be experienced as larger. There is certainly great need for improvement in the layout of our interior spaces, so that people are not always bumping into each other. One woman (non-contact) in my sample, a normally cheerful, outgoing person, who had been thrown into a temper for the umpteenth time by her modern but badly designed kitchen, said: "I hate being touched or bumped, even by people who are close to me. That's why this kitchen makes me so mad when I'm trying to get dinner and someone is always in my way."

Given the fact that there are great individual and cultural differences, there are still certain generalizations which can be made about what it is that differentiates one space from another. Briefly, what you can do in it determines how you experience a given space. A room that can be traversed in one or two steps gives an entirely different experience from a room requiring fifteen or twenty steps. A room with a ceiling you can touch is quite different from one with a ceiling eleven feet high. In large outdoor spaces, the sense of spaciousness actually experienced depends on whether or not you can walk around. San Marco Square in Venice is exciting not only because of its size and proportions but because every inch of it can be traversed on foot.