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Collaborative consumption of the work place promotes innovation and enhances productivity

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Earlier this month, the American Dialect Society announced the 2010 word of the year. Before I tell you what it is, I will recall the winners of years passed. In 2007 the winning word was "subprime," in 2008 it was "bailout," in 2009 the word "tweet" took the annual prize and the word "google," meant as a verb, was deemed to be the word of the decade. In 2010 the honor went to the word "app," as in "there's an app for that" as related to the past year's onslaught of smart phones and pad devices. The truth is, there usually is an app for "that..." whatever that may be. And it is changing the way we live and work.

Before we talk about work, and more specifically how and where we work, let's reflect on the way it is changing the way we live. One enormous impact that apps, along with multitudes of social and sharing sites, have is that they are making us more collaborative! Seems it would be the other way around. We should be becoming more isolated and lonely without face-to-face human interaction. Well, not at all. There are many positive aspects of social networks, but one of them caught my attention because it relates directly to the way I, as an interior designer, aim to define the role of interior space to my clients.

This one aspect was presented on the "TED Ideas Worth Spreading" website by social innovator Rachel Batsman who explained her research on "Collaborative Consumption." She had been exploring many sharing websites, such as Swap Tree, Trade Away, Zip Car, Switch Planet, Land Share, Go Get, and many more, and found that "we are wired to share!" Not only are we not lonely, but we are willing to let total strangers borrow our stuff! We all have too much of it, so why not switch from ownership to sharing? It seems natural and it is! Before we built fences, we lived, hunted, and gathered in packs. Today, technology is enabling us to trust each other and to feel a renewed importance of community. The global recession has shocked consumer behavior into one where, as Rachel Batsman explained, "usage trumps possessions, and access trumps ownership." We are transforming our consumer priorities from individual to collective good, from hyper consumption to "collaborative consumption." We are becoming highly enabled collaborators, not just passive consumers, or individual owners.

This idea of collaborative/community behavior is not new to work place design. This past "trend," is now, more often than not, the norm for many companies around the world. Sharing of space is happening at a phenomenal rate and it has tremendous impacts on the meaning and value of bricks and mortar real estate. It doesn't mean that we do not need real estate. It means that it is being used differently, more clearly as a tool. It is being designed to support function - again, definitely not a new idea in architecture but one that is being implemented in new and innovative ways. The role of knowledge workers is to process and exchange, or share, information. In addition to the hardware technology that supports this purpose, the space in which they work must also support it.

Space does not have to be owned by any one individual in order for that individual to be successful at their function. It must support their function by allowing them to concentrate or to collaborate. When one of those is being performed, a space applicable to that task is being used. When that space is not being used by one group or individual it can be "consumed" by others. Arguments of hierarchy, privacy and even storage needs are often used to make a case for one having to own space. The reality is that, storage can be movable with the individual, remember that most of us have too much stuff, storage should be minimal and stuff can be shared. In terms of hierarchy, space itself does not impact one's status within an organization. Space is neutral, and does not promote or negate status. Privacy can be achieved with a number of appropriate spaces when it is needed. Back to space shared, or consumed, collaboratively: Think of space as a power drill. We might have a drill because we need holes not because we like owning a drill. If not shared, our drill sits idle for most of its life until we need another hole.

Sharing not only fulfills our basic human instinct, it has been proven that enabling collaboration and open communication, sharing of thoughts and ideas, in the work place promote innovation and enhance productivity. When supported by a variety of shared work environments, such as team areas, phone booths, quiet zones, and social areas, knowledge workers can be untethered, collaborative or focused. A true collaborative consumption of space can be measured to support economy, sustainability, and performance. How? There is an app for that.

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