

LIVING SPACES, LIVING BEINGS - Bringing ideas to life

We are accustomed to consider plants and animals as living and most of the rest of creation as being without life. However I think there is more to life than that. Much of what seems inanimate is very much alive. Places and spaces can live. Ideas can live. Organisations can live. However, the difference seems to need people to have a particular kind of intention.

Lots of art but no life

I recently needed a room in London and on the Internet found a hotel close to the City. My room there appeared rather basic but gradually I became aware that, incredibly, it was furnished with furniture by Noguchi, Mies Van Der Rohe, Le Corbusier and other Bauhaus designers along with other iconic pieces. The dimensions of the bathroom seemed to be squeezed so as to leave more space for this odd collection. Incongruously the furniture included an ordinary (empty) domestic refrigerator supporting a kettle and the usual tea-making paraphernalia. With a wooden floor and no drapes, the room was more like a gallery than a bedroom. All this art! But the result for me was a total failure – a soulless and sterile space achieved at great expense with all the residual quality of a student rooming house. A collection of exotic parts that did not hang together as a whole.

Influence of the Bauhaus

Coincidentally with this story, the Bauhaus has been a big influence in my life. When I studied architecture at Leeds in the late '50s, I did a foundation course at the school of art with teachers who included Harry Thubron, Alan Davy and Hubert Dalwood. Thubron's course was based on ideas from the Bauhaus – which at that time had ceased to exist only a generation before.

In our drawing classes we discovered that, when drawing live models one had to draw not only the limbs and torsos but also the space between them. This might have been no more than a technique for getting everything in proportion.

However I also recall spending a great deal of time repeatedly arranging rectangular paper cut-outs on blank white backgrounds. In trying to arrive at a harmonious layout, what became clear was that the space between the rectangles was more important than the rectangles themselves. In the space there existed tensions or repose. The space had meaning. It was vibrant and energetic not, as it had previously appeared, passive and empty.

The works of abstract artists such as Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian illustrate this principle and, of course, it is evident that architects like Mies Van Der Rohe and Le Corbusier had a degree of mastery.



Pattern Language

The architect Christopher Alexander, in his book on the Nature of Order, talks about 'life' in architectural design but it is difficult to grasp what he is pointing to. It appears to be an abstract concept but perhaps he is also pointing at this quality of the space between things. Personally I think life has to be put there by people and perceived by people. The life is immanent in the way we arrange things. But how do we detect it? What is it we are perceiving when we do so? How does that affect us?

Patterns of thinking

In LogoVisual Thinking, people turn their ideas into objects that become the common raw material for a process that aims to elicit insights and deepen understanding. Time is spent arranging the material on a background in a way that makes sense to those involved. We repeatedly see people assign meaning to the space between ideas as they explore the relationship between them. The meanings they explore when they put space between ideas are on a much more subtle level than those of the ideas themselves expressed in words. What is more, the overall patterns that they uncover within the whole, reveal yet deeper levels of meaning, new insight, new knowledge and deeper understanding. As well as enabling people to tackle complex problems with the benefit of diverse contributions and to co-create, this information can transform those involved.

Life at High Trenhouse

33 years ago I bought High Trenhouse, then a near-derelict farmstead, to establish an experiential learning centre. During those years I have been witness to its reconstruction and also its emergence as a high-quality and quite unusual management centre. It seems to me that in the last few years it has come to life. But I am puzzled as to what makes it seem so. What is it that people perceive when they visit? It is below their level of consciousness as none can express it other than to say that they are struck by the place. Some of it is in the 'attention to detail' people note – and some in the consistency and quality. Some, for me at least, derives from the environment and from the growth of the gardens – nature is alive and well and smiling on the place. I conclude that life is not in the structures and furnishings but rather in the assembly of all of these parts into one whole that ideally fits its purpose. It resonates. Here we have simple parts that, by good fortune or the slow processes of accretion and patination, do make up a whole. With wholeness comes life. This is what people perceive.

Dialogue

By dialogue I mean David Bohm's idea of dialogue as a particular form of interaction that is concerned with the search for meaning. In dialogue, it seems to me, because people are listening to one another and aiming to build understanding, it becomes possible for something to occur between the people – literally in the space between them; not just in their individual heads as a result of words passing to and fro. It is almost that a shared mind begins to appear in the space between individuals in which all can participate. As they do so, it grows in strength. It has a life of its own, so long as they continue to nourish it. By participating in the 'space between', people experience a deeper wisdom than they normally access.

Professional contribution

I am an enthusiast for collaborative working. I love to bring people together to work on some joint endeavour. In my work I broker relationships post-merger or help break down barriers between departments or help people form teams. In every case, I see now, the actions enable relationships to flourish. It is not just that two (or many) people have more resources than one. It is that there is space between them and that life can develop in that space. It becomes a whole new dimension with all the potential thereof.

Why is any of this of interest?

Firstly I think it is important that we begin to recognise that our focus on parts, on things, has been excessive. It is not wrong but it is limited and needs other thinking to complement it. Fragmentary, reductionist thinking has proven immensely powerful but it has also proven highly fallible as it does not take account of the wholeness of nature (or the nature of wholeness). Thus we can readily overlook unwanted consequences. We have become used to waste, for instance, and discount it from our computations of profit or gain. We conveniently overlook the environmental and social cost of producing the goods we enjoy. Poverty and inequality are parts of our economic system that we can ignore. Lack of wholeness allows us to have a win-lose mentality with an easy conscience

Secondly is that, by dealing only in parts, we have experienced diminished meaning in our work and lives. It is a vicious circle that causes us to seek stimulus elsewhere, chasing mythical happiness in wild consumption or in other lands, forever working so we can forever seek pleasure.

Thirdly, whether the missing element is wholeness or we call it life or we may even regard it as Godness or spirit, its absence is an impoverishment of the quality of our life and work. If we are blind to this element then we are trapped in a poor replica of the world we could be living in. With only a pseudo understanding of how the world works, we will continue to despoil our planet and consume its resources and be ever more disappointed by the results of our efforts. Even on a mundane level, with no understanding, we are condemned to repeat past mistakes, to be unable to learn and to flourish. Is that a fitting legacy to leave future generations?

In the last quarter century, although mankind has enjoyed more tangible and disposable wealth than ever before in history, the results leave much to be desired. So can we now, I wonder, seek out the pattern behind phenomena that brings life into practical affairs and brings the spirit of wholeness into the relationships between people? That has been the focus of my own work for many years and I commend it to you.

John Varney, Chief Executive,
Centre for Management Creativity
August 2009