What space does innovation need?

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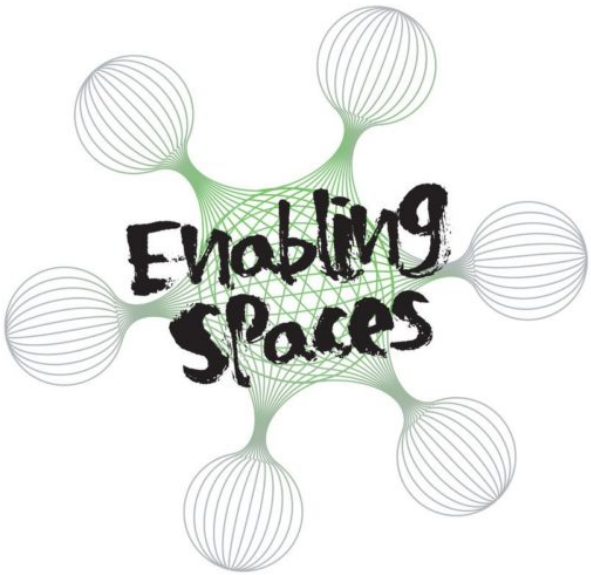

For Carina Trapl from the Vienna-based knowledge and innovation architects, theLivingCore, one thing is for certain: thinking and work processes and spaces are intrinsically linked and can stimulate or curb innovation within the company. We met up with her to get her views on working environments.

How would you describe theLivingCore*?*

Trapl: We call ourselves knowledge and innovation architects and thus compare ourselves to architects. Before architects build a new house, they try to find out how people would like to live in this house. The house should reflect their needs. When working with organisations, we go one step further. We don't limit ourselves to the physical space. Instead, we first analyse how the organisation aims to "function" in the future to be successful. Then we design spaces that help the organisation to shape their future.

How is your team put together?

Trapl: We are a very inter-disciplinary team with a background in landscaping, IT, general management and cognitive science as well as innovation research, fashion and product design.

And yourself?

Trapl: I'm originally an interpreter, translator and communication coach and I am currently studying cognitive science at Vienna University. I am particularly interested in which (communicative) environments promote the development of new knowledge.

How much influence do you think a space can have?

Trapl: It can be summed up in one sentence: "Everything that we design in turn designs us back". That means: what I produce does not exist independently from myself. By using a space, the space does something to me. By changing the world, we change ourselves. And vice versa. Therefore, it's important that I am aware of why I am creating spaces as the space can have repercussions—being either a help or a hindrance.

What is the main concern for your customers?

Trapl: Our customers would like a new office or they would like to become more innovative. Both of these fields often come hand-in-hand and our customers realise that they actually need both. Innovation tends not to favour airless spaces. It needs an environment that enables innovation.

What does an environment that promotes innovation look like?

Trapl: That mostly depends on the company. And, importantly, we call it an environment because most people automatically think of four walls when talking about a space. Innovation environments, however, do not start and end with the physical space. It's all about "enabling spaces" [Figure on page 4]! Architecture plays a huge role in these spaces but just as important are the social, organisational, cultural, virtual, cognitive and emotional dimensions. It is mainly about integrating these spaces into one whole space and keeping them in "good tension". This is different for every company.

How do you bring these buzz words to life?

Trapl: The first step is to analyse the organisation in all of these dimensions and define, for a future perspective, how it should function in all of these dimensions.

What does this kind of process look like in practice?

Trapl: In the analysis phase, we initially run interviews with relevant stake holders following one of our own developed methods. We also conduct ethnographic observations. Of course, we also look at the company strategy and the requirements of a future space. From that we then develop a strategic “core process model” which serves as a blueprint for all following measures (organisational measures, spatial measures etc.). The core process model in concrete spaces is implemented together with architects and with the close involvement of employees.

To what extent do you take on the work of architects?

Trapl: We define “space typologies” which aim to support the core process, that is the future way of working, of the company. Depending on the customer we can also take on layout plans, material selection etc. but this phase mostly involves an intensive and creative collaboration with architects working on the project. Our role is to ensure that the architecture corresponds to the future organisational model. We also lead the communication and change process with the employees.

Desk sharing and the clean desk policy are controversial trends in the world of office space planning at the moment. What are your thoughts?

Trapl: I’m more critical of these trends as they are often just cosmetic and not customised and adapted to the organisation. An example: a rigid clean desk policy prevents, for example, creative work as, for this, we need visual and haptic “mind anchors”. If the office is too clean, this hinders the creative process as we almost always have to begin our thoughts “from scratch”. What’s more is, the office is a place of identity. If personal items are prohibited at the work place, you lose an element of identity. And what employer would want that?

What does the office of the future look like in your eyes?

Trapl: I think the “founding myth” of coworking spaces already contains the idea of the office of the future: identity in diversity and creative meetings. The reason: when I think about it, why I go to an

office, even when I'm not obliged to do so, to be on-site at 8 a.m., it mostly comes down to interpersonal reasons—to meet somebody, exchange ideas, work on a project together—it's always down to a collaborative creation process. Therefore I'd say that the office is becoming more of a meeting place. It's actually about something really poetic.

And one last question: in this issue we're also looking at crowdworking. What do you think? Can crowdworking stimulate a company's innovative capacity?

Trapl: Actually it's precisely the opposite. Crowdworkers usually provide the creative input such as design or text. If a company is reliant on crowdworking then that means that it doesn't possess this know-how. If I only work with creative minds on a case-by-case basis, there is the danger that I cannot anchor innovation into the company in the long-term. But I do think that it would be interesting for companies to create spaces for the purpose of bringing these people in-house.