

Nomadology

Ty Francis, 2002

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Where do you get ideas?

I think this simple question is exciting because it suggests a link between location and inspiration. This is the theme of my presentation, and it's a truth that's been acknowledged by nomads for millennia.

I want to answer my own question, somewhat cheekily, by saying that the most creative space I know of is my bathtub!

I've actually tried suggesting to some of our corporate clients that they install them at their offices if they want to increase creative output, but no-one's taken me up on the suggestion so far!

Seriously though, the bathtub does illustrate one of my beliefs about the kinds of spaces that support idea-generation, creativity, inspiration, breakthrough... It's that you just can't legislate for what makes a creative space. Creativity is like the wind – it blows where it will. Breakthroughs happen anywhere – my last corker was at 30,000 feet above the Arizona Desert after 2 G&Ts while watching an inflight-movie I can't even remember! What architect could have designed for that!

As specialists in corporate and community breakthrough, innovation is our stock-in-trade, so we have been hugely exercised by the question of what makes an inspirational or creative space. A clue to our thinking about where you'll find the ultimate creative space is in the name of our company...

Unlike Talent Circus, we don't call ourselves 'virtual', but 'nomadic' and I've been invited here today to describe how Nowhere is nomadic, and how nomadology might have some ideas to contribute to this important debate about workspace design.

First, there is a lot of common ground between Hilary's account of a virtual company and my experience as a Director of Nowhere. This common ground is mainly demonstrated in our lack of dependency on office space – like a virtual company, a nomadic organisation isn't one that is space-less – it is just that we have reduced our dependency on a single working space to the barest minimum, and we use that freedom to support creativity as well as productivity.

However - we don't see ourselves as virtual or home-based workers as we are constantly on client site or out in the field together on innovation projects. One reason we called ourselves **nowhere** is because we are not based anywhere – we migrate, like nomads, to where the work is.

In addition, we are surprisingly low-tech business – we don't ordinarily use such a wide or sophisticated base of technology as I imagine the Talent Circus does in the delivery of our core offer. Of course we use technology – who doesn't now? But we put more emphasis on being present and using our physical presence as creative catalysts.

More significantly, perhaps, we differ from a virtual business because we are also nomadic within a client project.

What do I mean by this? Well, coming up with market-changing, profound innovation is an enterprise-wide issue. To get a ground-breaking new business concept off the ground, or to land and deliver an innovative business strategy requires the orchestrated efforts of everyone across the organisation. Innovation must become everyone's business, or it will fail.

So when we contract a piece of work, we have to carefully agree with clients that we can wander between staff teams and departments and sites and suppliers and stakeholders – that we can wander with some freedom. This is a very different and often challenging way of working – for both parties.

Nomads cross boundaries. In our corporate work, we can't help deliver out-of-the-box solutions if we are overly constrained within the silos and structures of the culture. We move between people and places and departments with sensitivity and, I hope, with skill, with minimal disruption to business as usual. We have to fit into other people's ways of working quite effortlessly and invisibly. But move we must if we are to gather a different kind of data that makes a difference to the business. Move we must if we are to tell inspiring stories that win hearts and minds and get people behind the project. Move we must if we are to connect the pioneers and practitioners within the organisation in new ways that get different results...

Crossing boundaries in this way requires a relationship of trust, and illustrates how nomadology is at the heart of our operating practice.

We don't go off with a brief and just report back in to the client – we co-create results by working as an integrated part of the client community. Wandering is a central aspect of nomadology, and it gets results. Not surprising, really. When we think of nomads, we think of bedouin and brahmin, merchants and minstrels, even these days, judges and journalists... All are nomads. Groups who travel have always played an important part in cultural transfer and transformation, and we try to use this fact to our clients' commercial advantage.

Belonging to a nomadic organisation, I also really agree with Hilary's description of connecting to a community of people who structure the 'now' moments – and another reason we called ourselves 'nowhere' is because the word **nowhere** comprises two 'hidden' words – now and here – emphasising what we believe to be the keys to creativity – the transformational capacity of the present (the future starts NOW) and the ability to use environments to support breakthrough (HERE is where we stand a chance of making a difference).

In this way, the **nowhere** brand demonstrates something core to our nomadic business philosophy about breakthrough – that by paying minute attention to what is, you see things you've never seen before.... Nomads can sniff out a watering hole in the most arid of deserts!

Salvador Dali called this ability to spot the unobserved 'moustache moments' – he was asked why he played constantly with his incredible moustache, and he replied, "To remind me that the answer is always under my nose!"

This ability to see into and surface the subtleties of things in this way – to look into the wilderness rather than at it – is a very nomadic skill. It's this ability to see what is normally invisible and to engage with it purposefully - that I believe is a distinguishing feature of a nomadic business model.

What is the relevance of this to workspace design?

Well, I believe the difference between spaces that work and spaces that don't depends on the extent to which people engage and engage with invisibility.

The big mistake that designers make is in not working with the invisible. The key to better workspaces is not in the colour of the walls, or the modernity of the furnishings. In fact, these things can get in the way. When a well-known design company in London spent nearly £2m some years ago kitting out its offices, they look fantastic... but if you go in there regularly, as I do, you're afraid to get creative – it's kind of inhibiting. And who hasn't been to a workshop in a newly-furnished hotel where you can't put flipcharts up on the walls? If the image of the place is more important than the work to be done there, we've surely lost the plot.

I want to suggest that being more creative and more conscious about the dimension of the invisible, the unnoticed, the unseen, will engage hearts and minds more powerfully in the future, free up creativity as well as productivity, and transform the nature of work.

In a number of areas at work, it's already happening. The DTI issued a report last year about the power of intangible assets. These invisible things – things like culture, brand, leadership, talent, are the future of developed economies. Learning how to draw upon them and deploy them successfully is business-critical.

This leads me to the heart of what I want to say about the invisible dimension of workspace. And it is an insight that has come directly from our nomadic way of working.

I believe that different places have a different energetic presence – something the classical scholars call the *anima loci* or spirit of the place. I also believe that constant use of a space in a particular way leaves an enduring energetic fingerprint on a building. In addition, I believe that highly charged events can influence the spirit of the place in profound ways that have consequences on the work of those who visit. Furthermore, in some instances, I believe it is possible to use this *anima loci* integrally as part of the work to be undertaken.

This might sound fruity. It's certainly challenging. But if you think about it, it is actually a very ordinary, everyday, phenomenon. Who hasn't felt the thick atmosphere in a room after an argument, and experienced how tricky it is to change the atmosphere? Look along our roadsides these days, and you'll see where people have laid flowers for loved ones who have been killed, perhaps in a traffic accident. Open yourself to these places and can't help but feel moved. Or take Ground Zero, where the World Trade Centre once stood – the nature and extent of the horror there will be enduring, and hugely influence architectural developments and cultural consciousness for generations to come.

The idea that we can exist independent of our environment, and that environments don't subtly and profoundly influence us, is an illusion. Nomadic peoples did not share this belief of separation. They understand that spaces have characteristics – a hill can be introverted and outgoing, a river can be threatening and calming... attention is paid to the felt sense – the beingness - of a place before they camp there. The aborigines knew this centuries ago, and the notion of "songlines" in aboriginal culture is based on this awareness of drawing on the spirit of the place.

As nomads with a business bent, **nowhere** is looking carefully at this invisible, indefinable quality – the presence of a space or a place – and we are asking what I think are important questions about how to harness and use it to support breakthroughs for our clients.

A number of us are actively researching how we can learn to tap into the potential of different places to support particular kinds of work. We are experimenting with the extent to which we can draw on, adapt and stretch our own and our clients working processes and practices by matching the objectives of the work with appropriate spaces.

For instance, we know that at certain stages of the work, executives can learn more about company vision from the top of the Sierra Nevada mountains than in a workshop in Wapping, and that visiting a temple in Kyoto, where every leaf that falls from a tree is picked up instantly by one of the Zen monks, has more to teach some of our clients about the future of service and the spirit of staff attention to detail, or of the vitality of maintaining spaces, than a trip to the Henley Centre for yet more business data.

Even on the humble 'awayday,' being more creative and more conscious about drawing on the invisible qualities of space gets better quality results. We've seen what happens when we try to support unconventional thinking in a very conventional environment. And it's *not* a pretty sight!

What this means in terms of a nomadic business, and how we differ from a virtual business is that as nomads we depend on spaces and places to get our results.

There is a paradox here – not having a place of our own, we have had to understand how to get results virtually anywhere – motorway service stations, coffee bars in Soho, airport lounges, in the bath... Nomads need to work in harsh and inhospitable places – like the Ramada Inn at Rugby... and to cultivate skills to work independently of environmental considerations such as noise, crowds, lack of resources and so on.

In this, we have learned a lot about the qualities of space that support inspiration, creativity, innovation. They aren't what you might imagine. We find the average corporate office complex or hotel chain two of the most unproductive creative environments imaginable. Our most basic requirements are natural light, emptiness, the freedom to make a little bit of mess and some reasonable noise, plus – this felt sense of the place.

We actively seek out this invisible, indefinable quality that is hard to intellectualise about but you feel it in your bones when you are there, you get the tingle in your bodies... and it does make a difference!

Think of inspirational spaces... they probably have these same characteristics, but they also have presence in bucketloads. It's often not the wow factor – it's more subtle than that. Inspirational spaces aren't always the ones that have the word "icon" in front of them, like Stonehenge, or Gaudi's Sagrada Familiar Cathedral, or The Guggenheim in Bilbao. They include hilltops, village parks, even terraced houses. I remember going to a Hindu Temple in Leicester some years ago, and feeling the presence of the holy – yet the temple was actually a converted Victorian terraced house!

In conclusion, then, there are two things that architects and designers and companies must engage with if we are to have more creative workplaces – nomadology and invisibility.

Being nomadic has compelled us in **nowhere** to ask some deep questions about when we are in work-mode and when we are not, when we feel in the 'office' or not? Our people have to own their work – not their workspace. Not having conventional workspaces – and inviting clients out of their offices and factories – constantly stimulates our sense of the contribution of place and space to work flow and organisational culture. It also ensures that we are constantly in dialogue and development, questioning what kinds of workspaces work for which kinds of interventions, and how workspace frees up human potential.

I hope you'll agree that there's more to being a nomad than travelling light! Thank you for joining me in this place.