

**Creating the Best Atmosphere for Conflict Resolution Success:  
A Framework for the Future**

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## Table of Contents

CHAPTER	TITLE	PAGE
	Title Page	i
	Acknowledgements	ii
	Table of Contents	iii
1	Introduction	1
2	Theories	5
	2.1 Feng Shui	6
	2.2 The “Getting to Yes” Mindset	9
	2.3 Practicality	10
	2.4 Endnotes	12
3	Aesthetics	13
	3.1 Organization and Space	14
	3.2 Shape	16
	3.3 Color and Light	17
	3.4 Sound and Noise	18
	3.5 Endnotes	21
4	Objects	22
	4.1 Doors and Windows	22
	4.2 Tables	23
	4.3 Chairs	24
	4.4 Other Objects	25
	4.5 Endnotes	27
5	Other Influences	28
	5.1 Site Selection	28
	5.2 Familiarity and Neutrality	31
	5.3 Size	32
	5.4 Time	33
	5.5 Food	35
	5.6 Temperature	36
	5.7 Other Considerations	37
	5.8 Endnotes	39
6	Conclusion	40
7	Bibliography	42

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

How do you feel when you walk into a conference room? A cathedral? A classroom? A gym? Do some people's houses just make you feel "at home" while others make you feel afraid to sit down? How are you personally affected by a bare apartment, echoing before its tenant has gotten a chance to furnish and decorate it?

The spaces in which we live and work affect our moods and attitudes in a very real way. The light, color, furniture, temperature and locale each influence how we respond to our environment and the people within it. Why, then, do we hold so many meetings for the purposes of conflict resolution, from personal mediation to international treaty negotiation, in conference rooms under fluorescent lights?

Henri Lefebvre argues that space involves not only the physical place, but the mental correlation with it.<sup>i</sup> It is not a far stretch, therefore, to realize that the physical elements of a space have an impact on the mental space which the people using the space occupy. In layman's terms, we must recognize that physical space affects a person's mood. The following chapters explore how we can alter the physical space in order to alter the mental space – that is, orient it toward the reception and acceptance of conflict resolution.

Before we can create a space which is better suited for conflict resolution, we must first recognize that space has its own politics. Space can be chose, produced, changed, manipulated and formed to suit our own purposes, needs and intentions. People create space, and in turn, space affects our responses to other people and ideas. In order

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<sup>i</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1991), 3.

to create an atmosphere more conducive to the success of conflict resolution, we must re-envision the purpose of the space. To orient it toward real, lasting success, we must first want to create a collaborative, rather than competitive, environment.

I argue that the immediate surroundings of a meeting for the purposes of conflict resolution do have a direct impact on the success or failure of the resolution. The space which houses the negotiations or other efforts is an often forgotten yet integral part of the resolution process. Small, intimate experiments and negotiations suggest that making people more comfortable with their surrounding conditions makes them more receptive to conflict resolution. The research contained herein was inspired by a group project conducted over a year ago in an Introduction to Conflict Analysis and Resolution class at Georgetown University which suggested that receptiveness to conflict resolution greatly depended on internal responses to external stimuli, i.e., a person's immediate environment.<sup>ii</sup> This element of conflict resolution can similarly be applied to cases of international conflict resolution, arbitration, or negotiation.

Conflict resolution methods used today on large international scales, such as the conference table and fluorescent lights mentioned above, may actually reinforce conflict rather than cushioning the debate. Often frustrated diplomats are put in uncomfortable situations until they reach a resolution. Does this in fact speed up the process and

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<sup>ii</sup> The class was Introduction to Conflict Analysis and Resolution, offered by the Justice and Peace studies in the fall semester of 2004. The group members were Matthew Murphy, Emily Conger and this author. The project involved a role-play designed by the group members and executed in two phases. The first phase consisted of placing the participants of two delegations into a typical conference room with a long table, fluorescent lights and harsh noises. At the end of ten minutes, the participants had polarized themselves at opposite sides of the table and were yelling at each other. At that point, the participants were placed in a holding area (separated) and the original room was quickly transformed. Softer lights were used, pillows and blankets were spread on the floor, soothing music was played and food was set out for the participants. The participants were allowed back in the room and continued their negotiation. Without instruction, the two delegations mixed their seating together, ate together and discussed their conflict more calmly. At the end of ten minutes, they were well on their way to a resolution. The results of this role-play were not scientific and the author does not claim that the events apply to every situation. The project is discussed here merely to explain the inspiration for this endeavor.

provide motivation for them to come to an agreement, or does it just serve to inflame the participants and ingrain the conflict?

In the following pages, I will explore the relationship between a person's immediate surroundings and that person's ability to resolve conflict. It would appear clear that polarizing opposite sides in a conflict and subjecting them to harsh conditions would produce negative results; however, negotiations are often carried out on opposite sides of a table in a stark room under fluorescent lights. Here, I will provide theoretical and practical justification why we should more closely consider the immediate environment when engaging in conflict resolution.

It is my hope that this project will help to highlight an element of conflict resolution which has only been addressed from the periphery. By combining so-called "alternative" theories such as feng shui and soundscape studies with "practical" methods that have been explored as part of negotiation analysis and interior design, I intend to focus on the environmental and spatial aspects of conflict resolution.

Focusing on real solutions and alterations of physical space, I hope to address Lefebvre's criticism of those who study psychological space – that is, that their studies are hopelessly ideological and ridiculously ungrounded in social practice. The suggestions and analyses found in the following pages are actual elements that transcend the theoretical and can be used in real social practice. In this way, I intend to bridge the "abyss between the mental sphere on one side and the physical and social spheres on the other."<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>iii</sup> Lefebvre, 6. No philosopher is safe from the indignation of Lefebvre, including Chomsky and Derrida, and he goes as far to call their links between psychological and physical space "quasi-logical."

In focusing on atmospheric pressures and effects on the people that operate within a space, I am not arguing that space alone can be used to control the outcomes of conflict resolution. Ultimately, focusing on space gives mediators and engagers in conflict resolution the opportunity to give a successful outcome the best shot possible. This is not meant to manipulate one or several of the parties engaging in conflict resolution, but instead to provide them with the best chance possible for a mutually beneficial agreement through ensuring a relaxing, unobtrusive and focused environment.

## **Chapter 2: Theories**

While I would argue that not much theoretical work has been published regarding the relation of space to the success or failure rates of conflict resolution, several theories applicable to this topic can be drawn from other disciplines. Perhaps one of the most prevalent concepts when discussing aspects of spatial arrangement today, the ancient Chinese practice of feng shui experienced resurgence throughout the world in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. For our purposes, feng shui can and should be used as a lens to analyze space and its effects on a person's behavior.

Emphasizing balance and harmony between a person and the space around him, feng shui can be used to prepare an environment which positively attributes to the success of conflict resolution. Businesses and home-owners alike in Hong Kong take feng shui very seriously; experts are well-paid and employed as both practitioners and consultants when buying a home, starting a business or deciding which bank to use. However, the possibilities that feng shui bring to the field of conflict resolution have not been adequately explored. Below, I will examine some of the more practical aspects of feng shui and how they can enhance the suitability of an existing space and aid in choosing a space for conflict resolution

On the other end of the spectrum lies the rhetoric developed in competitive business and negotiation environments. While much of this rhetoric can be contrary to our purposes here, that is, achieving an outcome satisfactory and beneficial to all parties involved, this information must nevertheless be considered if only for the reason that it is the most respected information published regarding negotiation and space. Upon a closer

analysis, one can find that this rhetoric has much to offer if viewed through a collaborative, rather than competitive, lens.

Finally, elements of practicality must be considered. Theories do little good, especially in a study of something as concrete as space, unless they can be implemented. We must ultimately apply another lens of common sense when we discuss organizing and choosing a space appropriate and helpful for conflict resolution.

## **Feng Shui**

Literally translated, *feng shui* means “wind” and “water.”<sup>1</sup> Also called eco-art, feng shui is a holistic discipline involving architectures, astrology, dates, conservation, orientation and spatial arrangement. For the purpose of exploring its relationship to conflict resolution, we will concentrate on what feng shui can tell us about architecture, orientation and spatial arrangement.<sup>2</sup>

While feng shui can be traced back to the fourth century B.C.E., the roots of its concepts and practice most likely extend to settlements of Chinese farmers centuries before. These farmers concentrated on the cycles of the earth, including rain, flood, sun, frost and drought. The Chinese found a natural balance in the predictability of these cycles and saw their fate as entwined with their environment and nature’s power to create and destroy. They sought to find a harmony between their own lives and the forces of nature, upon which their livelihood so depended.<sup>3</sup>

Rossbach asserts that “feng shui evolved from the simple observation that people are affected, for good or ill, by surroundings: the layout and orientation of workplaces and homes.... They (the Chinese) concluded that if you change your surroundings, you

can change your life.”<sup>4</sup> If feng shui can affect our lives, surely it can affect important decisions or resolutions of conflict.

Feng shui also has ecological implications. It teaches that a person should “harmonize, to not disrupt nature. Tampering with nature might disrupt its equilibrium.”<sup>5</sup> Feng shui stresses harmony and balance between people and their surroundings. The Chinese express this concept as a process and principle called *Tao*. As Rossbach explains,

“The concept of Tao evolved out of ancient Chinese observations of nature and identification with it. They saw that nature was constantly in flux yet cyclical, and that their crops and fates were determined by and depended on the way of nature. Man and nature follow the same laws. As a *principle*, Tao is a wholeness stemming from balance, a harmonious union of interacting opposites. As a *process*, Tao is constant, cyclical change, opposites spawning each other – the yearly cycle of summer leading to winter, returning to summer. Through understanding the patterns of Tao, feng shui experts seek balance and equilibrium to achieve harmony with the environment.”<sup>6</sup>

Feng shui also teaches that there are complementary dualities, called *yin* and *yang*, which govern the universe. Yin and yang are contained within everything; however, some elements particularly represent either yin or yang, such as dark as yin and light as yang. Feng shui teaches that conflict, malaise and a general feeling of being off-balance occurs when these elements are not maintained in the proper balance. The connection between oneself and one’s environment is best when yin and yang are balanced.<sup>7</sup>

While feng shui as it relates to interior design concentrates primarily on the flow of the *ch’i*, meaning breath or energy, through a room or a building, there is much that can be gleaned from the basic teachings. People respond differently to different spaces. Feng shui teaches that this is the impact of environmental *ch’i* on personal *ch’i*.<sup>8</sup> A

healthy environment promotes the flow of positive ch'i, otherwise known as good feng shui.

Mystical elements of the practice of feng shui do influence most feng shui practitioners. While for the purposes of this analysis, we will not explore the spiritual beliefs or practices that may influence feng shui, it is nevertheless important to understand some of the basic beliefs and motivations that affect the teachings of elements such as furniture placement. One motivation is the *I Ching*, known as the “mother of Chinese thought.” A book which contains ancient Chinese beliefs on divination and ancient wisdom, the *I Ching* also contains studies in beliefs surrounding yin and yang and how they relate to cyclical change. Most importantly for feng shui practices, the *I Ching* teaches about an octagonal shape containing eight trigrams called the *ba-gua*, used to diagnose environmental imbalances. Each of the eight areas corresponds to a different symbolic element, such as wisdom or wealth. Feng shui experts superimpose the *ba-gua* on the layout of whichever room or house of which they hope to improve the feng shui qualities.<sup>9</sup>

Feng shui experts seek to create balanced and fluid surroundings and minimize coarse lines and angles. Rossbach uses the example of encountering a wall as soon as one enters through a door to a building or room:

“If your entrance door opens onto a wall, then your ch'i will be blocked. Having to move around the wall as soon as you enter will affect your posture, and coming up against the wall will make you feel defeated, lowering your expectations in life. As a result, you will struggle.”<sup>10</sup>

This would be a terrible start to a day of negotiation or conflict resolution. Even if it affects a person subconsciously, the effect can be very real. Perhaps feng shui can teach us much about what possible designs put people in a more peaceful state.

According to Rossbach, there are nine basic cures for rooms that contain poor feng shui.

1. Bright or light-refracting objects: mirrors, crystals, or lights
2. Sounds: wind chimes or bells
3. Living objects: plants (real or man-made), bonsai, flowers, aquarium or fishbowl
4. Moving objects: mobile, windmill, whirligig, or fountain
5. Heavy objects: stones or statues
6. Electrically powered objects: air conditioner, stereo, or TV
7. Bamboo flutes
8. Colors
9. Others<sup>11</sup>

The implementation of these nine cures will be discussed in later sections.

### **The “Getting to Yes” Mindset<sup>12</sup>**

Most of the literature that exists about location and atmosphere and how they relate to conflict resolution comes from a myriad of books about how to be a better negotiator and “get what you want.” While some of this material is pertinent to our discussion about conflict resolution, some can be quite dangerous. Conflict resolution on every level, but perhaps most importantly on an international scale, must involve an outcome with which both sides can live. If one side walks away from the argument feeling like they just got completely demolished, the conflict has not been resolved and it is unlikely that the solution will last.

Fisher and Ury’s *Getting to Yes*, like many books about conflict resolution and negotiation, has very little to say directly about the effect of one’s environment on the effectiveness of conflict resolution. Like much literature, it recognizes site selection and setup as important, but tends to gloss over it with only a few sentences or pages. In this case, only the second edition addressed the question of “Where should we meet?”

directly. The authors, in just a few sentences, touch on several important concepts, including the possible need for seclusion from distractions, the availability of technical or practical support and the issue of power positioning, such as meeting at your “opponent’s” office if you feel that you will need to walk out.<sup>13</sup>

However, it remains important to explore the arguments presented in books such as *Getting to Yes*, because this has been the prevailing literature available to people concerned with setting up a space for negotiation. We can still learn from this literature; some of the basic understandings are quite pertinent. For example, Fisher and Ury state that any negotiation may be fairly judged by three criteria: “it should produce a wise agreement if agreement is possible,” “it should be efficient” and “it should improve or at least not damage the relationship between the parties.”<sup>14</sup> Essentially, the environmental objectives pursued here should enhance these three criteria. The environment should allow a negotiation to proceed more smoothly and efficiently while encouraging understanding and positive relationships between the parties involved.

Creating a better atmosphere for conflict resolution success is part of a broader picture – one which includes re-envisioning how we approach conflict resolution from the most basic level. The most successful negotiations and conflict resolution will be those that are conducted in a respectful, honest environment with the parties working toward a collaborative, not a competitive solution.

### **Practicality**

Practical considerations often dictate the environment in which conflict resolution occurs. One does not always have the luxury of being able to set spaces up to particular

specifications best for conflict resolution. Therefore, sometimes only all or part of these suggestions can be feasibly used.

Additionally, it must be stressed that there is no one formula for setting up a space for conflict resolution; only suggestions. Each situation must be individually evaluated in order to determine what setup would work best for the parties involved. History of conflict between the parties, outcomes of prior negotiations and size of the parties are all elements that must be considered. For example, a structured environment emphasizing rules and barriers between the parties might be the best atmosphere for enhancing security and comfort-level for parties involved in a highly volatile negotiation, while a collaborative environment containing few barriers between the parties might be the best atmosphere for sides willing to reach a consensus and in need of a long-lasting settlement of their disputes.<sup>15</sup>

## Endnotes: Chapter 2

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Rossbach, *Feng Shui: The Chinese Art of Placement* (New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1983), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Rossbach, *Interior Design with Feng Shui* (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1987), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Rossbach 1983, 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Rossbach 1987, 9. Original emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 15-17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, xiii.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 168-169.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Sharon C. Leviton and James L. Greenstone, *Elements of Mediation* (Washington, DC: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1997), 19.

### **Chapter 3: Aesthetics**

Victoria Ball asserts that three purposes stimulate both creations in general and creation of a space in particular. The first and primary motivation for space creation is practical necessity. Secondly, a space can be used to communicate a message. Finally, according to Ball, a space can be created merely for the enjoyment of the user.<sup>16</sup>

Keeping these criteria in mind, how does the appearance of a space affect the attitude of the user? They will work better within a space if it meets their needs, speaks to them in a constructive way and provides positive experience.

When designing a space with conflict resolution in mind, how much attention should be paid to the beauty of the space? According to Victoria Ball, beauty is the principal goal of interior design.<sup>17</sup> She goes on to suggest that beauty is “an experience, a special kind of interactivity between ourselves and our environment.”<sup>18</sup> If beauty is an interaction, then our environment must affect us in a very real way. Interdependence exists between a person and his environment through both conscious and unconscious responses.

Therefore, how a space *looks* to the user can be almost as important as what it *does* for the user. Functionality and beauty cannot be separated; they must instead be approached as a cohesive unit when designing or enhancing a space with conflict resolution in mind.

## **Organization and Space**

Selection and arrangement of one's surroundings can create beauty and artistic form. This response, that is, the pleasurable response a person has to something beautiful, can be used to put a person at ease. Therefore, proper organization can add to a person's comfort level and make them more receptive to engaging actively and constructively in a conflict resolution process.

The space should, therefore, be neat and orderly. If an office is used, papers should be stacked properly and books placed in an orderly fashion on shelves. Negotiation literature advocates a neat appearance in everything from end tables to your personal briefcase because it will reflect well on your personal habits.<sup>19</sup>

However, one should consider why exactly a person would want to appear well-organized. It gives the image of confidence and preparedness. As such, a well-organized person will command respect. Rather than looking at respect as a power tool to be wielded in a competitive situation, we should view it as an atmosphere that we should strive to attain in any space used for conflict resolution. Creating a mutual environment of respect builds a foundation upon which a conflict can be rationally discussed.

Additionally, we cannot ignore the practical benefits to maintaining a good level of organization. If everything is easy to reach, easy to use and especially easy to find, the chances for you to get flustered, unfocused and off-balanced are lessened. Likewise, your air of comfort and confidence will translate to both your partners in negotiation and the people with whom you are negotiating.

Adequate work space is also an important necessity to consider when creating an atmosphere for conflict resolution.<sup>20</sup> This involves both the size of the room, which will

be discussed later, as well as the organization within the room. If the negotiation will need space to spread out large papers, such as maps, adequate space must be provided. This includes the proper furniture that work of this nature demands. Again, the importance of preparation for negotiations cannot be stressed enough. Each side must ascertain as clearly as possible what issues will be discussed and what items the other side may need to facilitate the resolution. This applies in both mediator-driven and direct negotiation situations.

The teachings of feng shui help create an ordered environment from chaos through organization that improves “energy flow” through a room or a building and perhaps more importantly creates a symbolically serene and ordered place. One can achieve this in part by avoiding clutter. Clutter, according to Simons, indicates worry and neglect. While practically impairing movement and creating a sense of general unbalance or uneasiness, clutter in various locations can mean different things symbolically, usually negative.<sup>21</sup>

Clutter at a doorway symbolizes blocked access to the world. Additionally, as participants enter a room for the purposes of conflict resolution, seeing clutter immediately distracts them from the task at hand and may unconsciously put them in a less positive frame of mind. Feng shui would argue this is due to the effect of the clutter on their personal energies.<sup>22</sup>

Overhead shelves containing clutter represented “obstructed yang energy,” which feng shui suggests will result in conflict with others or feeling overwhelmed. Symbolically, clutter on overhead shelves must be eliminated in spaces used for conflict resolution. Practical considerations mandate the elimination of such clutter as well, for

clutter overhead can be dangerous if it becomes unstable and falls. Even if the clutter is not unstable, it can provide a distraction to the people using the room and even a conscious or unconscious fear that participants must be aware of falling objects at any time.<sup>23</sup>

## **Shape**

As a highly symbolic practice, feng shui places great emphasis on the shape of the room. The need to avoid death-oriented symbolism is great; however, this is often culturally particular. For the Chinese, tombstone-shaped buildings or a dual-tower setting resembling incense sticks placed on ancestral altars would be avoided.<sup>24</sup>

Square, rectangular and round shapes are usually considered to be the easiest with which to work. Irregular shapes and sharp angles should be avoided, because they distract from one's focus and create an off-balanced sensation. They contain too many corners and create a complicated, disrupted energy flow. Traditional Chinese houses often utilized an inner courtyard, surrounded by four single-story buildings, possibly implemented to mimic the ideal arrangements of natural mountains which they respected.<sup>25</sup>

Feng shui discourages U- and L-shapes because they are perceived as incomplete and tend to stifle the energy flow within. To work with such a shape, feng shui suggests placing a balancing element to "complete the shape." For example, a fountain, tree, or even a floodlight can be placed outside a building to give the effect of completing the square.<sup>26</sup>

Trapezoidal shapes or others with two parallel and two nonparallel sides give the feeling of a lack of direction. Feng shui suggests that they can confuse or weaken a person's sense of purpose. Triangular shapes also generate anger or restlessness. They create a perception to which we are normally unaccustomed, and tend to throw most people off balance.<sup>27</sup>

Mirrors can be strategically placed inside a room to complete a more "balanced" shape. They are best way to remedy odd an irregular shapes, because they give the appearance of size and balance.<sup>28</sup>

### **Color and Light**

According to Ball, "emotional responses even to small areas of color can be explosive."<sup>29</sup> Since we are trying to create an unobtrusive and calming effect to improve the focus of the participants in a conflict resolution, an explosive response would not be ideal. Colors should not be a distracting element, but a room should not be so devoid of color that it dulls the senses. Again, one should consider a healthy balance when approaching any element of design.

According to Leviton, the best colors are neutral and nonprovocative.<sup>30</sup> This theory would explain why so many rooms are painted a variation of beige; in simpler terms, beige is least likely to offend someone. Hot, dissonant wall colors can provoke destructive emotion or produce anxiety.<sup>31</sup> In a place conducive to conflict resolution, the last emotion that a mediator or party to the conflict would want to produce from the room itself would be one of violence or anxiety.

Similarly, light should be strong enough to prevent tiring the eyes but soft enough to prevent glare.<sup>32</sup> Diffuse light tends to work better than concentrated light, because it is easier on the eyes and produces fewer glares. Natural light can be helpful as well, for too much electronic light (such as computer or a television screen) or fluorescent light can be tiring. Most people prefer to work in a room with windows, but the windows should be attended to properly as well. Windows in the wrong location may expose the room to heat and unwanted direct, heavy light at certain times of the day. This must be measured and explored before the event if at all possible.

### **Sound and Noise**

The place of negotiation should be a quiet place, free from distracting noises. Noises can hinder a person's concentration and may also make them nervous or irritable.<sup>33</sup> The incessant tapping of computer keys or ringing of phones can break a person's train of thought. Ideally, the location should be a place where no one will interrupt the negotiations. Concentration, on the part of both sides, is necessary. The room should also have enough sonic insulation as to limit outside noises and conversations from other rooms from seeping inside the space and creating a distraction.<sup>34</sup>

R. Murray Schaffer suggests that acoustic design of a room can act as a counter-effect to visual stress.<sup>35</sup> This has possibilities especially considering the possibility that a room may be assigned for conflict resolution. At such times, audio enhancements may be crucial when visual enhancements are not a possibility. Schaffer suggests that soundscapes should be adjusted with 1) "a respect for the ear and the voice," ensuring

that the sound is not so loud that voices are strained or cannot be heard; 2) “an awareness of sound symbolism;” 3) “a knowledge of the rhythms and tempi of the natural soundscape;” and 4) “an understanding of the balancing mechanisms by which an eccentric soundscape may be turned back on itself,” or transformed into a more soothing soundscape.<sup>36</sup> Especially on the last point, Schaffer turns to the Chinese concepts of feng shui and yin and yang to explain this transformation. He advocates seeking a balance between sonic elements, by nature a contrast to Western music, which often functions by creating tension between sonic elements. Additionally, Schaffer suggests avoiding excesses in the sonic landscape, again contrasting to Western music, which often utilizes sonic extremes.<sup>37</sup>

Specifically, Schaffer believes that the following elements balance one another in soundscapes:

Sound / Not sound  
Technological sounds / Human sounds  
Artificial sounds / Natural sounds  
Continuous sounds / Discrete sounds  
Low-frequency sounds / Mid- or high-frequency sounds<sup>38</sup>

In each case, the above left-side elements tend to dominate the right-side elements. Reducing left-side elements or increasing right-side elements will often create harmony in the sonic environment. Schaffer argues that these concepts are too large for a single person to alter; instead, what a single person can do is illuminate to a group or a society what redesigns need to be implemented.

An understanding of these concepts allows a designer to create a more balanced space sonically. Furthermore, a mediator or a party to a conflict can use these elements as guidelines in choosing a space for conflict resolution. Schaffer’s concepts do not

contradict research in negotiation fields which has touched on sonic elements; they reinforce the need for attention to sound and acoustic design. While negotiation literature has concentrated primarily on the need for sound-proof rooms free from distractions and sonic interference, Schaffer goes further to suggest that we should approach sound in a more holistic manner.<sup>39</sup>

### Endnotes: Chapter 3

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- <sup>16</sup> Victoria Kloss Ball, *The Art of Interior Design: A Text in the Aesthetics of Interior Design* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> John Ilich, *The Art and Skill of Successful Negotiation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973), 31.
- <sup>20</sup> Leviton, 75.
- <sup>21</sup> T. Raphael Simons, *Feng Shui Strategies for Business Success* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 127.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Rossbach 1987, 66.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 67.
- <sup>27</sup> Simons, 155.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ball, 94.
- <sup>30</sup> Leviton, 18.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 75.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 18.
- <sup>33</sup> Ilich, 30.
- <sup>34</sup> Leviton, 18.
- <sup>35</sup> R. Murray Schaffer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1977), 237.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, 238.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 239.

## **Chapter 4: Objects**

Furniture arrangement and the organization of the room directly affect how the parties to a conflict relate to each other on a basic level. Seating plans should be carefully arranged, because they will very likely determine who will be communicating with whom during the meeting. The placement of furniture within a room is one element which may determine the habits, reactions and effectiveness of the people meeting within that room.

### **Doors and Windows**

First, the room should have full doors that are able to close completely to ensure privacy.<sup>40</sup> They should be able to close securely because a creaking door can cause the inhabitants of a room to constantly have the sensation that someone is entering a room. Over a period of time, this added expectation can cause a person's heart to beat faster and become more excitable. This will cause the person to not be able to focus well on the task at hand, namely the negotiation. The creaking door may also give a person the sensation that someone might be coming up behind them to interrupt them, and they will experience decreased concentration and productivity.<sup>41</sup>

A similar theory can be applied to windows. A creaking or banging window can produce many of the same negative affects described above. Additionally, windows are important sources of light to a room. The last chapter outlined several considerations relating to natural light entering a room through windows. Moreover, feng shui teaches that energy flows in and out of windows, and that too many windows together will create

a room that is too active. Again, we must consider balance in choosing or designing a space for conflict resolution, for that balance will help determine how many, what type and where windows should be placed.

## **Tables**

While the shape of the table does effect how the people around it relate to each other, data needs to be collected as to what shape table is most effective for use in a situation of conflict resolution. Leviton suggests that the table shape best suited for a given negotiation depends upon the characteristics of the people and groups involved.

Rectangular tables, while common, have head and foot positions and can be difficult to use. If the negotiation includes a single mediator or co-mediators, they can occupy the head and foot of the table and therefore have more control over the meeting. However, if the negotiation does not include a third party mediator, the effect can be polarizing and discourage collaboration between the two sides of the conflict.<sup>42</sup>

Square tables do not incorporate a head or foot position; therefore, no one person of the negotiation can command the meeting by seating alone. Suggesting consensus and equality, square tables can be used with or without mediators.<sup>43</sup>

Round tables provide an unobstructed view of all parties seated at the table. Because each seat has an equal position and no edges or dividing lines exist, round tables give the greatest impression of collaboration and equality.<sup>44</sup>

Table height is generally dictated by practicality rather than a sense of collaboration. While coffee-height tables provide a greater sense of collaboration and provide fewer barriers between the parties, their functionality is less than that of desk-

height tables, for they are difficult to write upon. Desk-height tables unfortunately provide a greater perception and actuality of barriers, but because they make note-taking easier and provide a greater sense of comfort to the participants, they are usually preferable to smaller tables. Additionally, if the conflict between the parties is particularly volatile and there appears to be the possibility of violence between the negotiating parties, desk-height tables enhance security and diffuse fighting by providing barriers.<sup>45</sup>

Occasionally, when the participants of the negotiation have little need to write, it is possible to create a setup without any table. This should only be used when the potential for violence is absolutely minimal. A no-table setup provides the fewest number of barriers between the parties and increases direct interaction to its fullest.<sup>46</sup>

## **Chairs**

Negotiation literature refers to chair selection in terms of power as well. Ilich insists that a negotiator must never sit in a chair that is lower than his opponents; he should find a chair that at least as high if not higher than his opponent's.<sup>47</sup> Since we are trying to re-imagine conflict resolution in cooperative rather than competitive terms, I will appeal to a more practical approach regarding chair height. Rather than creating an awkward atmosphere by sitting higher than your opponent, an equal height should be created. It is simpler and more comfortable to look straight at someone, rather than up or down.

Ilich also recommends picking a comfortable chair is large enough to permit simple movement to keep the body relaxed, while incorporating a relatively straight back

and firm cushion. This will prevent slouching and ensure full breathing, which will improve alertness.<sup>48</sup> Grogginess clearly inhibits your concentration and weakens the other side's respect for you.

The use of sofas, while creating a relaxing, informal setting, is discouraged because they do not enhance communication levels. A sofa generally does not follow the above considerations in choosing a chair with a straight back and a firm cushion. Parties can easily be placed in an awkward position where they cannot sit up comfortably, especially if the sofas are too soft. Again, it must be stressed that the participants should be concentrating on the conflict resolution, not on their surroundings; therefore, sometimes the setup that is simplest to use and least distracting from the task at hand is the best. Perhaps more importantly is the consideration that sofas do not encourage direct contact between the parties, because they must twist their bodies in order to look at each other.<sup>49</sup>

The placement of chairs is related to the discussion regarding tables above. Face the chairs toward the person with whom you want the parties to communicate. If a third-party mediator exists, and the situation is particularly hostile, facing the chairs toward the mediator will encourage discussion with the mediator and discourage contact directly between the two parties. If no mediator exists, then chairs facing one another encourage interaction between the parties to the conflict.<sup>50</sup>

### **Other Objects**

One final consideration regarding objects is to ensure whatever is placed in the room follows Ball's three criteria. Useful, pleasing additions that do not communicate a

negative message can be appropriate when they contribute to the balance and harmony of the room. Ensure that wall treatments, window treatments or furniture treatments do not provide distractions to the task at hand or violate the guidelines to resolution-oriented aesthetics outlined above.<sup>51</sup>

## Endnotes: Chapter 4

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<sup>40</sup> Leviton, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Rossbach 1987, xiii.

<sup>42</sup> Leviton, 18.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Ilich, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>49</sup> Leviton, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 18.

## **Chapter 5: Other Influences**

Many other influences which do not fit into a neat category are instrumental in creating a space for conflict resolution. Some, such as the importance of safety and neutrality, are some of the most basic considerations existing when choosing or creating a positive space. Although they may not be neatly packaged, these influences are certainly not an afterthought.

### **Site Selection**

Sometimes the site selection depends on the nature of the negotiation. For example, a particularly sensitive issue might be more suited to discussion in an isolated or neutral locale, or even somewhere that holds particular symbolism.<sup>52</sup>

Imagine a situation where bilateral negotiations are occurring between the United States and Spain. Where should the negotiations occur, on a very general level – Washington, Madrid, or a neutral third location? Negotiations in Washington may be convenient for the US delegation; however, the members of the US delegation may be distracted by their usual responsibilities and personal lives and less able to focus on the particular negotiation at hand.

As stated earlier, much of the research regarding choice of location involves power dynamics and how you, as the negotiator, can create a space that will give you the “upper hand” in a dispute or argument. While the success of whether or not the use of these strategies will ultimately increase the likelihood of producing an equitable agreement has not been determined, and certainly needs to be more thoroughly

documented, these strategies must nonetheless be discussed as the prevailing literature on this subject. While the research is skewed toward a competitive approach rather than a collaborative approach, some of the information can be useful if applied with both sides in mind.

If you have the luxury of building a new space for the purposes of conflict resolution, feng shui offers much in the realm of site selection. Although the motivations of a feng shui practitioner may differ considerably for someone seeking out a practical, peaceful location in which to allow a person to focus at resolving the conflict at hand, many of the elements for which they should be looking are quite similar.

First, look at the ground around the location. Is there grass growing? If yes, is it healthy, green and plentiful? While feng shui experts would argue that healthy grass or nearby lawns is a sign of plentiful ch'i, one may also recognize that healthy vegetation probably indicates an area relatively free from pollution and high traffic, both which may contribute to a less tranquil experience. A plot of land with many bare spots on which flowers may not bloom could indicate negative aspects of the environment that may not be obvious at first glance.<sup>53</sup>

Observe the animals in the area, wild or domestic. Healthy animals with a positive demeanor indicate good energy, and wild animals probably indicate a relatively tranquil environment. Deer, as a symbol of prosperity, are considered a particularly good sign by feng shui experts. The positive energy demonstrated by the presence of healthy wildlife might indicate that rural environments are more suitable to conflict resolution than urban environments, where it would be unlikely to find large animals roaming

freely; however, the health and atmosphere portrayed by domesticated animals can also indicate an environment of positive ch'i.<sup>54</sup>

Observing and meeting the people that live in the area of the possible site is another piece of advice taken from feng shui that may seem quite basic. Feng shui suggests that successful and happy neighbors indicate a positive energy flow in the environment. Common sense would agree with this philosophy, for a positive attitude from the people around an area make the area a much more relaxing and positive place to exist. Considering that we are attempting to make the atmosphere as accommodating as possible for the success of conflict resolution, this important element cannot be overlooked. A prevailing attitude of gloom or a persistent rate of failure in the area may indicate that something in the element is not conducive to a positive environment.<sup>55</sup>

According to the teachings of feng shui, hillsides are considered the best places to inhabit, for mountains are considered outcroppings of ch'i from the earth. When the ancient Chinese built their homes where hills did not naturally exist, they created them. A rounded hill rolling into a river valley was valued as having the best feng shui. From a practical viewpoint, such a hill would protect the dwelling from floods while not over-exposing it to strong winds. Additionally, it could protect it from sandstorms or heavy direct sunlight. Gentle slopes are easiest to build on; they provide good drainage and do not have the sharp angles that feng shui experts oppose. In feng shui, the more protection, the better; practically, the more protection the natural setting provides, the less the building itself has to compensate.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, feng shui teaches that an establishment is best built near a clean, meandering river. According to feng shui, rivers are lifelines in which flow ch'i.

Meandering rivers promote the steady flow of ch'i, while a straight river or one with sharp bends exhibits sharp angles and improper show of ch'i. Discarding these theories, a river is helpful for water supply and irrigation purposes, and a meandering river is easier to use and safer to work around. Moreover, a softly flowing stream has a calming affect on people. A clean river and the presence of life therein, much as the presence of wildlife discussed earlier, indicate a healthy site.<sup>57</sup>

At the end of the day, it appears that most elements of feng shui are grounded in practical considerations. Whether providing necessary elements such as access to water or shelter for a sandstorm, or creating a more tranquil and relaxed environment, feng shui as one guideline should not be ignored when considering the construction and placement of elements within a space used for conflict resolution.

### **Familiarity and Neutrality**

If you, as a participant in a negotiation, have the opportunity to decide the location where the negotiation will take place, the most important criteria is to find a place familiar and comfortable. While the prevailing literature argues that as a negotiator, you should conduct negotiations on your “home turf,” be that your office, preferred lodging or resident city,<sup>58</sup> you should instead strive to find a location where both parties feel comfortable. If one participant or delegation is comfortable and at ease, but the other is uncomfortable and nervous, this does not enhance the chances for resolution but instead opens the door for poor communication and misunderstandings.

Familiarity is also very important in choosing a location. Ilich compares it to a home team's advantage at a sports game, stating, “It's a familiar environment where most

of his preparation has taken place. He can thus concentrate more on the game rather than burning up energy adapting himself to new surroundings.”<sup>59</sup> For a student, the more appropriate analogy would probably involve exam-taking. Where would you rather take your finals, in the classroom where you have been learning the material all semester (and therefore you have been there many times and are not in danger of getting lost on the way) or a room in an office building downtown that you have never previously visited? We tend to prefer what is familiar to us, and that familiarity should be taken into consideration when choosing a location for conflict resolution.

Even the competition-oriented negotiation guides argue that if you cannot choose your “home base” as the location of the conflict resolution, then you should seek out a neutral location in which to meet.<sup>60</sup> In fact, Leviton’s guide to mediation insists on a neutral location for the competition-oriented reasons stated above.<sup>61</sup>

### **Size**

The size of the space chosen for conflict resolution should be appropriate to the number of people participating. A giant auditorium is not conducive to a meeting of three people; it is unnecessary and wasteful, and creates an intimidating atmosphere which is compounded by the many acoustic problems it presents. People begin to complain of being overwhelmed and alone.<sup>62</sup>

Conversely, cramming 50 people in a small conference room is also not going to present a healthy atmosphere for meeting. Crowding causes tension, anxiety, aggressiveness, violence and sometimes neurosis or schizophrenia.<sup>63</sup>

However, the perception of feeling crowded does not always coincide with the physical state of being crowded. The sensation of being crowded is always negative, the actual physical distance between people and objects when they feel crowded can differ from situation to situation and person to person. Freedman discusses how people can operate in quite close quarters without feeling crowded if their spaces are properly designed and used in a well-ordered manner.<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, the space should be comfortable. People should not feel on top of one another, but the space should be intimate enough as to facilitate conversation. Cultural elements play a large part in determining how much “personal space” people need in order to feel comfortable. This is yet another area where cultural knowledge and sensitivity is of utmost importance in conflict resolution.

## **Time**

Although not completely specific to the external environment of a conflict resolution, time is nevertheless an important consideration of the atmosphere. In certain circumstances, particularly large negotiations between governments or corporations, the time may be set by someone not involved in the conflict resolution. At the least, it can be assumed in large meetings such as these that the time cannot be modified to suit the personal preferences of each individual member of the delegations. However, in a case which the conflict resolution does not involve many people directly, such as that of a personal nature, small company or certain high-level summits, time is an element that can be successfully and necessarily manipulated.

Each person functions best at a certain time of day, be it morning, afternoon or evenings. Some people feel terrible if they work on weekends. Others work best early in the morning, while still others cannot function before noon (and those two important cups of coffee!) Some people need power-naps, and others feel most comfortable retiring to bed at an early hour. Many Spanish, for example, are accustomed to taking a long lunch followed by some down-time in the afternoon from about 2:00pm to 4:00pm, called a “siesta.” These hypothetical examples illustrate that individuals can differ greatly in their preferences for optimal working time. Personal, environmental and cultural factors affect how they view time.

Therefore, if a participant is fortunate enough to set his own timetable for conflict resolution, he should recognize the times of day when he will function to his optimal level. It is in the interest of each party to formulate a schedule with which both sides are comfortable. Negotiating with someone who is irritable or half-asleep will not only waste time but also increase the chances that the meeting will reach an impasse at which neither side wishes to negotiate.<sup>65</sup>

Other considerations include travel time and the level of exhaustion that one may expect to accompany it. If you have just disembarked from a twelve-hour flight, you are probably not in any state to be negotiating. Likewise, if your counterpart has just arrived, he is probably not rested and refreshed either. One might think that it would be a benefit to you if the other party to the negotiation is tired and not on top of their game; however, instead of giving you an advantage, it will only put both parties at a disadvantage by impairing their levels of communication and coherency.<sup>66</sup>

A good rule of thumb regarding exhaustion and sickness would be to compare the severity of the illness with the importance of the negotiation. An important summit between two country leaders should probably not be conducted while one is running a fever; however a bad cold will probably not get you out of court when contesting a parking ticket. Of course, when confronted with an externally imposed deadline that is truly inflexible, this type of flexibility may not be possible.

One final note on time: again, always weigh the effects of time for each given situation. Often, one cannot dictate when he will negotiate, and as such should be prepared to negotiate when not at his full potential. Losing an opportunity to negotiate due to tiredness when a better opportunity is not available does not give the party an advantage, for at the end of the day, the purpose is to resolve the conflict.<sup>iv</sup>

## **Food**

Another condition that a delegate can usually control is what kind and how much food he eats before entering into a conflict resolution. Another case that proves the benefit that comes from a person being in tune with his body, eating can alter one's mood and vary alertness. While each individual is different, a person should generally take care not to eat too much food or very heavy foods before entering a meeting, because heavy foods such as pastry or potatoes can temporarily dull the senses and leave one sleepy or disconnected. Lighter foods such as seafood or lean meat are more beneficial and will allow you to refuel without impairing your ability to function.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> Ilich's mantra regarding this is, "Never lose an opportunity to negotiate, but never negotiate until you are certain it's an opportunity." (Ilich, 22-23)

Contrary to the results of the group project mentioned above,<sup>v</sup> most theorists argue that food can hinder the success rate of conflict resolution rather than help it. They argue for the reasons above, if food is served at a meeting, the participant should ensure that he eats sparingly to avoid food lethargy.<sup>68</sup>

## **Temperature**

It may seem like common sense, but nevertheless, we must discuss the need for adequate heating, cooling and ventilation of a space. We have all heard stories of how temperature has been used to coerce people into making a decision. Juries have been locked in rooms without air conditioning to make them uncomfortable and force them to come to a consensus (or at least a hung jury). Throughout this paper, I have been arguing that coercive tactics such as this should not be implemented. Instead, we should try to create a positive, collaborative, focused environment in which to conduct conflict resolution. Therefore, temperature needs should be adequately met.

Proper ventilation is perhaps the most important. While different people have different concepts of the “perfect” temperature, we can all agree that a stuffy room is not a pleasant space in which to spend what may be the extended time of a conflict resolution. After proper ventilation is achieved, temperature can be maintained at a reasonable level. Participants should come prepared to long meetings with layered clothes so that they may make themselves individually warmer or colder according to their personal preferences. In general, I would suggest that in setting the temperature, one err on the side of slightly too cold, the emphasis being on *slightly*. Warmer temperatures tend to induce sleep, while colder temperatures tend to make a person more

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<sup>v</sup> See Footnote i.

alert. Furthermore, it is easier to add a layer of clothing when too cold than remove a layer when too warm.

While culture and home environment also play a large (and perhaps primary) part in determining at what temperature a person is most comfortable, a study was done that suggested that a mean “comfort” level (4.0 on the Bedford scale) is achieved with an ambient temperature of 73 degrees Fahrenheit (23 degrees Celsius), humidity of 40%-60%, while wearing long pants and a long-sleeved shirt. Additionally, the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) suggests a “comfort envelope” (MCE), or range of temperatures in which most people experience comfort. They define these temperatures as 76 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit (24 to 27 degrees Celsius). This study was conducted with very light clothing and sedentary activity, explaining why the temperatures were slightly higher.<sup>69</sup> It is important to keep in mind that these studies were conducted on people with a Western background; different cultures (and therefore home environments) might be comfortable with different temperatures.

### **Other Considerations**

Primarily a practical consideration, the availability of restroom facilities is nonetheless important.<sup>70</sup> Whatever space you are using for conflict resolution, there should be restrooms readily available and easy to find. This becomes a particular consideration when the meeting is of such a nature that requires high security measures. Although restroom facilities should not be located directly off the negotiation room unless the room is thoroughly insulated from the sound of flushing toilets, the facilities

should still be close enough nearby that will enable the possibility of taking restroom breaks but maintaining concentration levels. Therefore, they should be located within the area secured for the negotiation. If a person has to go through repeated levels of security, metal detectors, etc., in order to leave for and return from the bathroom, the flow of the negotiations can be interrupted easily.

Another practical consideration to note in the event of a large-scale conflict resolution is the availability of additional, smaller rooms off the primary location.<sup>71</sup> Such rooms must be available within the secure environment of the negotiation location for the reasons listed above, i.e., maintaining concentration and the flow of the meeting. Sometimes groups will need to break down into smaller venues, and location should not be a distraction in this case.

## Endnotes: Chapter 5

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- <sup>52</sup> Daniel Druckman, *Three Cases of Base-Rights Negotiations: Lessons Learned*, (Washington, DC: Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Department of State, 1987), 195.
- <sup>53</sup> Rossbach 1987, 29.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid, 31-32.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid, 35.
- <sup>58</sup> Ilich, 23.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid, 23.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid, 24.
- <sup>61</sup> Leviton, 17.
- <sup>62</sup> Jonathan Freedman, *Crowding and Behavior* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975), 8.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid, 1.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid, 10.
- <sup>65</sup> Ilich, 21.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid, 22.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Gary W. Evans, ed., *Environmental Stress*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 82.
- <sup>70</sup> Leviton, 18.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, 18.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

The physical setting is not the be-all-end-all of conflict resolution; without proper preparation of the material at hand and understanding of the cultural intricacies that affect the individuals involved in the resolution, the best location cannot produce positive results. Environmental effects and pressures on conflict resolution should never be used as a substitute for cultural understanding and spending the time and effort to show the proper respect for the individual, group or government with which one is negotiating. This study is meant as a supplemental guide to be implemented in addition to and beyond the other elements necessitated by each individual situation.

However, choosing a location and setting up that location is an element of conflict resolution that can improve the chances of its success. Unfortunately, it is usually forgotten, rushed or not understood adequately enough to be implemented. In this paper, I have tried to outline elements relating to site selection and enhancement that should be approached collectively. The environment should not be the reason why a conflict resolution is unsuccessful; therefore, it is important that all appropriate measures are taken to ensure it is the most beneficial atmosphere possible.

I have tried to keep the discussions above appropriate to a collaborative rather than competitive atmosphere for conflict resolution. Therefore, while this information can be applied by actual participants in a negotiation, there are perhaps even greater possibilities for designers, supervisors and third parties to make use of this information. I hope that this knowledge will help negotiators and third parties alike who are interested

in conflict resolution to create spaces that ease tensions and set negotiators and ease, making it easier to move to a discussion of actual needs and rationale issue settlement.

The possibilities for this material to be used in third party mediation are immense. In Leviton's words, "the physical setting can have an impact on facilitating communication, gaining and maintaining control of the argument, reducing or increasing pressure on the parties, and insuring the safety of all those involved."<sup>vi</sup> Although I have consistently argued that conflict resolution should be a collaborative rather than a competitive process, third party mediators can use environment to empower their position and keep a potentially dangerous atmosphere collaborative and safe.

One element that is most acutely highlighted above is the necessity for further research in this field. Statistical data is unavailable to definitively test these theories regarding the affect of immediate environment on conflict resolution success. I would strongly advocate that these elements be tracked much more thoroughly in the future for further study and revision.

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<sup>vi</sup> Leviton, 17.

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