



Future centers can build innovative organizations

Future centers are spaces for problem solving and solution seeking. They are used to create new knowledge and plan how to apply it in practice, bringing government into closer contact with citizens, connecting end-users with industry, enhancing cooperation within a region, and supporting collaborative innovation on multistakeholder issues. Their core business is developing innovative solutions to challenging business, organizational, or societal problems, in particular solutions where the active, intelligent cooperation of diverse people is important.

How can a space be designed to foster creativity and cooperation? The simple answer is: by paying attention to the design and interaction of the physical, emotional, technological, and social environment; the working methods used there; and the facilitator who animates the session. In normal meetings and workshops there are tables and chairs, boards for writing, and projectors for presentations. People have their usual places to sit and their usual ways of speaking, listening, and reacting, easily leading to predictable thinking and results. In future center sessions, patterns are purposely broken. Surprising environments and unexpected activities create possibilities for thinking differently and doing things in new, better, often surprising ways. The facilitator guides and creates an environment where mutual respect, understanding, and trust among collaborating partners are possible.

Above everything else, future centers are people spaces (Figure 1). People are central to the solution-seeking process. This is why centers design spaces to create people-friendly atmospheres that are both comfortable for session participants and relevant to the tasks at hand: the living room; the library; the garage for building things; the garden; the sports hall; the kitchen; the café; and many others, depending on the

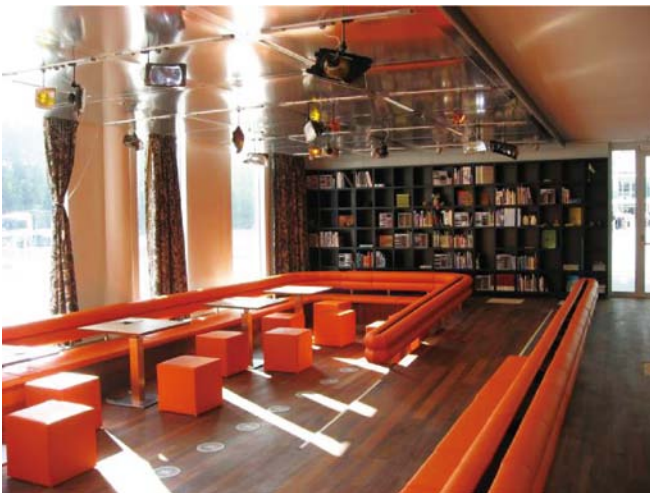


Figure 1. LEF future center, the Netherlands. Photo courtesy of H. Kune.

culture of the country and the issues to be addressed. The environments are triggers that support activities in different phases of an innovation process: understanding the context of a problem; cocreating promising ideas; building prototypes to test them; overcoming obstacles; enhancing flexibility; and enabling teamwork. The arrangements of furniture in these workspaces, such as different configurations of chairs and tables for specific activities, subtly encourage active participation, goal-oriented behavior, focused reflection, social interaction, or individual creativity as a session requires. Pictures on the walls of the people, situations, and locations of the problems that a future center session wants to address help remind people that their work inside the workspace has an effect on the world outside.

These spaces that are different from the places participants usually work in contribute to breaking patterns of thinking and behaving, allowing new ideas and perspectives on issues to emerge. Since everyone is asked to work in an unexpected environment, everyone is equal; sometimes simply being invited to write crazy ideas on the walls, or talking to each other in unusual spaces is enough. As one participant explained: “The center’s unconventional approaches allowed us to break free of convention, and hierarchy became a thing of the past.” In addition, people enjoy working in spaces like these, and this element of fun and enjoying the work while tackling serious issues is essential to the success of future centers in facilitating the innovation process.

How do the centers work?

Since the mid-1990s, organizations in Europe have been working with varieties of future centers in sectors as diverse as transportation, taxation, insurance, banking, energy, education, employment, agriculture, spatial planning, water and coastal management, smart systems, and stimulating an entrepreneurial economy. In the last five years, new kinds of centers have been developing in Asia, especially in Japan.

The future center work process revolves around three things: the issue addressed; the people who participate; and the center itself. Typically, a diverse group of stakeholders is brought together to deal with a specific challenge. Depending on the challenge, various methodologies and techniques can be used. The role of the facilitator in guiding groups through activities in different stages of the innovation process and different spaces in the center is of great importance.

Regardless of which methods are applied, a future center process adheres to a number of operating principles (Figure 2), including the following:

- Sustainable focus: The center supports its users in addressing significant issues with long-term perspectives in order to arrive at

systemic, sustainable solutions that can be realized in the short and middle term. For example, one future center addressed the challenge of revolutionizing the design of the future kindergarten to provide children with a better educational environment. Ten future images, based on different perspectives (e.g., democratic education, science, physiological development, parental perspectives) were developed. Each of the kindergarten teachers who participated in the process adopted one of the future images and realized it in one space of his/her kindergarten.

- Meeting people on equal terms: Each participant has an equal voice, which is independent of his/her hierarchical, political, or professional position. A government organization in the Netherlands wanted to cocreate a new sustainable model for procurement in cooperation with the construction sector. The commitment from all parties to create and implement something new was needed. Their future center used the physical metaphor of a boat to emphasize the importance of cooperation among the many stakeholders from different organizations. By putting participants in a physical boat in one of their workspaces, the session reinforced the concept that all parties in the project were “in the same boat” and the importance of working on equal terms in this complex project; people could either row together toward a shared goal, or go around in circles, or even sink the boat. The sessions helped participants redefine their own tasks and contributions to the project and talk openly about their expectations of others.
- Concrete results: The focus of sessions is producing concrete results that adequately address problems and issues. Prototyping is a work process actively used to make ideas and intentions tangible and to test and improve them with actual stakeholders in the real world. One future center program on flood control and innovative water management in the Dutch river delta asked project participants to take their plans and promising ideas out of the center and into the community to test them in conversations with stakeholders in the area that would be effected such as residents, civil servants, business leaders, and decision makers. A lot was learned about what people really required, what they thought was unacceptable (and why), and the possible unintended consequences of seemingly good ideas. In the end, it made the decisions about policy a lot more realistic and resonate with the needs of the community.

After two decades of experience, we understand that a future center is as much a mindset as it is a physical working space. Both are necessary for success. The space should send clear signals that creativity and innovation are desired. Both new purpose-built spaces and older existing buildings can be designed for this. Spaces can be located in one central place, or else temporary and dynamic, moving to where people work and live, and problems actually occur. In all instances, it is important to designate the space as dedicated to innovation and design it accordingly.

In a vast variety of shapes and forms, and under diverse names in different sectors, future centers are proving to be powerful instruments for supporting entrepreneurial discovery, developing knowledge economies, and creating sustainable changes in society. Whether the focus is on small steps or great leaps, developing an innovation dialogue in the organization and the community is essential. In this way, future centers contribute to open innovation, open government, and enhancing the creative power and problem-solving capacity of industry and society. The future is a moving target, and at a time when change is everywhere and standing still is equivalent to slipping backward, it is important to move with it. ☺



Figure 2. Operating principles of future centers. Illustration by A. Dvir in *OpenFutures—An Operating System for Future Centers* (R. Dvir, editor, Brussels: OpenFutures, 2008).



Hank Kune actively engages in projects on innovation, organizational renewal, and learning, with a special emphasis on hands-on problem solving in complex social, societal, and administrative situations. Recent work has focused on systemic innovation in public policy making, developing innovation-enabling environments to support societal innovation, and transnational collaboration. He has worked on initiatives with diverse organizations in Europe, Africa, and Asia. He is an active member of the New Club of Paris, a global network organization working as agenda developer for knowledge societies, and Founding Partner of the Future Center Alliance.