

The “I” POD: Moving from Community to Territory

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With the last passenger Boeing 747 scheduled to roll off of the assembly-line this year, we are reminded of how a culture of community – represented by the Pan Am “Sky Lounge” – has given way to a sort of “podification” of personal space. This is a phenomenon witnessed in everything from cruise ships, to airplanes; libraries, to autonomous vehicles; Amazon, to the way we use our phones while walking through the city. In architecture, the traditional Southern California model of courtyard housing has given way to gated communities, street-facing multi-car garages and “podium block” urban development.

As the larger implications of this turn from community belong in the realm of sociology, this paper will focus instead on the historic development across architecture, planning and product design, and contrast it with the more public goals of a similar “podification:” that of “Plug-In City” and Metabolism, which sought greater interaction through the shedding of personal possessions as opposed to the increasing isolation being fostered today.

. ONCE THE QUEEN OF THE SKIES, THE 747 WILL SOON BE JUST A FLYING TRUCK Headline, Los Angeles Times, March 12, 2017

THE AIRLINE

The last 747 passenger planes still being flown will be retired at the end of 2017, and Boeing now produces just six each year, constructed exclusively for cargo. When the 747 was introduced 47 years ago, it was a marvel, unprecedented not simply in sheer size and flight duration, but in the level of comfort and interior roominess. Its most distinguishing characteristic was the “bulge” at the top. Pan Am dubbed it the sky-lounge, creating a haven allowing first-class passengers to leave their seats during the flight, have a cocktail and hors d’oeuvre’s, and mingle with other passengers (Fig. 1).

Today, first-class passengers no longer mingle. They cocoon in a private pod, where one need not interact with others. Isolated, secure and

indifferent, like children being driven to school by their parents, rather than dare ride their bike alone, without a helmet (Fig. 2).

THE LIBRARY

The grand reading rooms of the past, three stories tall and filled with natural light from clearstory windows, the reference collection surrounding rows of old hard-wood tables, individual desk lamps and a fellow intellect sitting adjacent, are slowly being replaced. One questions if the opportunity for chance encounters being are replaced as well.

At the University of California Berkeley, 135,000 books were recently removed from Moffitt Library (LAT, April 17, 2017) for a renovation that added sofas, break-out rooms, movable furniture, and, of course, self-contained study pods (Figs. 3 & 4).

THE SCHOOL

Anyone who has worked in education design the in the past decade is familiar with Steelcase Contract Furnishings “education solutions” division which is currently promoting “active learning spaces.” It features multiple lines of desks, chairs and tables, all on wheels, to support multiple ‘active’ arrangements of classroom space (Fig. 5).

It also features a private study pod that they call, wait for it: -“The First-Class Cabin” (Fig. 6).

THE CRUISE SHIP

Gone is the common deck promenade, where a chance encounter might lead to a short dalliance. Think James Cameron’s Titanic, where a Leonardo DiCaprio can meet and fall in love with Kate Winslet.

Today, every cabin has a private balcony and the only place to mingle is the buffet line.

THE COMMUTE

Picture a commuter on a subway or a bus, the passenger next to him peering over his shoulder, reading along. Soon, we will be able to avoid this annoyance, this invasion, as our driverless electric Uber picks us up and delivers us to work. At lunch, walking down a crowded city street, we no longer take the time to smile at a passer-by, people watch, smell the flowers, listen to the cacophony of sounds that make up John Cage



Figure 1: Continental 747. Sky Lounge (Cabinet of Curiosities)

like symphony of music that is the city. We no longer savor the sound and the texture of the crunch as we step on the fallen autumn leaves on the sidewalk, so immersed in the screen in front of us, head down, ear pods firmly ensconced, looking up only to see if the intersection is clear.

Gone is Jane Jacob's observation that "the sight of people attracts more people," (Jacobs, p. 37) and her insight that a vibrant, safe and successful city neighborhood relies on: "... different people, bent on different purposes, appearing at different times, but using the same street." (Jacobs, p. 183). Walking through the city staring at a 6" screen is little different than sitting on the sofa playing Sim City: it is not an act of community building, but rather an act of territory building.

BRAND-NEW, IT'S RETRO

It can be reasonably argued that this is a trend that began with the automobile and the suburb and accelerated with the advent of telecommuting. Further, there is the countervailing reality of more open work environments, co-work spaces, communal classrooms and the prevalence of a Starbucks on every corner, where the "telecommuters" go to work in an atmosphere ostensibly less isolated than their bedroom. And yet, even at Starbucks, we still want our own table, still stare at our own screen, still demand our own territory.

One is reminded of the musician Tricky and his song, *Brand-New, It's Retro*, for today's "podification" is not without an antecedent. Superstudio, Archigram, the Metabolists and others explored personal pods for living as well. Their intent, however, was not to carve out territory, not to isolate, but rather to build community and to liberate. For this generation, disposability was a virtue. Disposability allowed for freedom of movement, for freedom from things.

As Peter Cook wrote in the editorial to Archigram 3:

Almost without realizing it, we have absorbed into our lives the first generation of expendables . . . We throw them away almost as soon as we acquire them . . . the idea of keeping a piece of furniture long enough to hand it on to our children is becoming increasingly ridiculous . . . We must recognize this as a healthy and altogether positive sign. It is the product of a sophisticated consumer society, rather than a stagnant (and in the end, declining) society (Sykes)



Figure 2: Today's First Class Cabin (Business Insider)

For today's society of sustainability, these words might strike terror, but in that place and time, it was seen through the lens of "less is more" rather than today's lens of commodity extraction and landfills.

Warren Chalk writes in the same issue:

*One of the most flagrant misconceptions held about us is that we are not ultimately concerned with people . . . but if our work is studied closely there will be found traces of a very real concern for people and the way in which **they might be liberated** from the restrictions imposed upon them by the existing chaotic situation, in the home, at work and in the total built environment (Sykes) (Emphasis mine)*

Kisho Kurokawa, in *Metabolism in Architecture*, echo's this premise:

People will gradually lose their desire for property such as land and big houses and will begin to value having the opportunity and the means for free movement. The capsule means emancipation of a building from land and signals the advent of an age of moving architecture. (Kurokawa)

For Cook and his colleagues, the Pod was less about possessing space than it was about shedding possessions, or, David Green writes in *Living Pod*: "With apologies to the master, the house is an appliance for carrying with you, the city is a machine for plugging into." (Cook)

THE PROXIMATE AND THE REMOTE

We meet here at the boundary between the proximate and the remote, community and territory, the common and the pod. From the Sky Lounge to the library reading room; the city sidewalk to the private balcony; today we can choose between a culture of community, or the iPod of territoriality: the proximate or the remote.

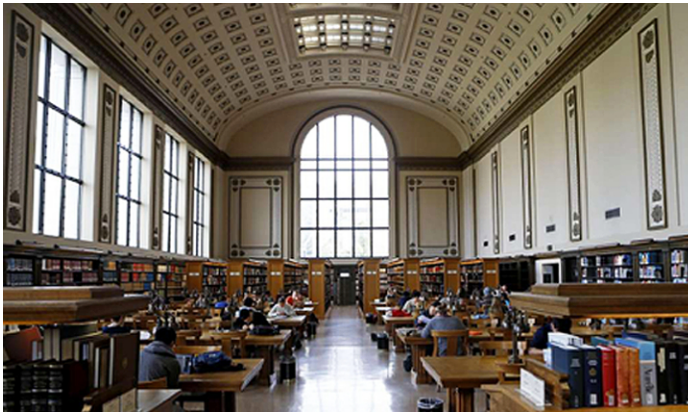


Figure 4: U.C. Berkeley Library Reading Room (David Butow, LA Times)



Figure 5: U.C. Berkeley Study Pod, (David Butow, LA Times)

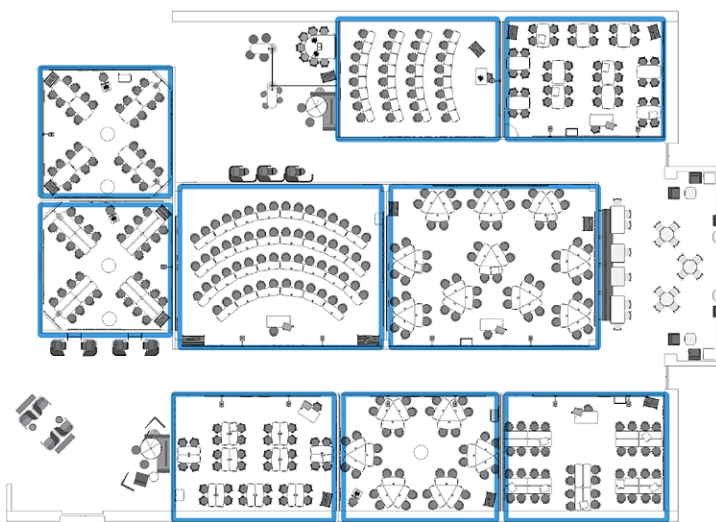
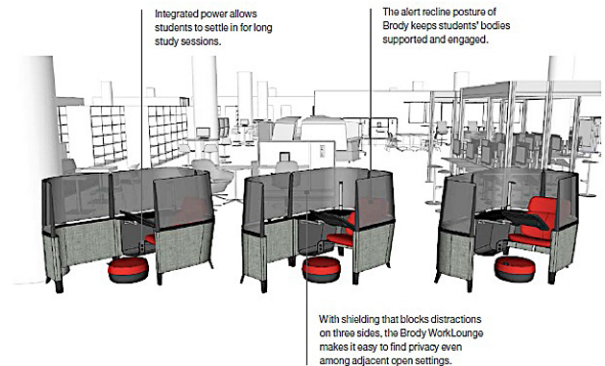


Figure 6: Steelcase Education classroom layout options and "The First Class Cabin" study pod

First-class cabin

When angled to the outside, this application of the Brody® WorkLounge supports both focused and diffused thinking—allowing students to seek inspiration when they need it and easily get back into flow and get work done.



ENDNOTES

1. Samantha Masunaga, *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2017.
2. Teresa Watanabe, *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 2017.
3. Jane Jacobs, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (New York: Vintage Books, 1992): 37; 183.
4. A. Krista Sykes, "Essential Writings From Vitruvius to the Present: The Architectural Reader" (New York: George Braziller Publishers, 2007): 182; 184.
5. Kisho Kurokawa, "Metabolism in Architecture" (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977)
6. Figure 1: <http://static.messynessychic.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/CONTINENTAL74OCEANIALOUNGE-vi.jpg>
7. Figure 2: <http://static5.businessinsider.com/image/5102d2bd69beddc54e000014/these-are-the-9-best-first-class-seats-in-the-world.jpg>
8. Figure 4: <http://www.trbimg.com/img-58f6afec/turbine/la-1492561994-2wumn8o117-snap-image/1000/1000x56>
9. Figure 5: <http://www.trbimg.com/img-58f6b10d/turbine/la-1492562283-rqia474b6x-snap-image/1000/1000x563>
10. Figures 6: Steelcase Education: Insights, Applications and Solutions, V.5: 10, 50