

Laudation for Aat Vos by B. Joseph Pine II at the presentation of the Karl Preusker Medal 2021

Dear Ladies & Gentlemen, Dr. Sabine Homilius, family and friends of Aat Vos, the aatvos team, and above all dear Aat himself,

I wish I could be there in person to deliver this address, but even by means of this recording it is an absolute honor to provide this laudation that recognizes and esteems Aat Vos, an astounding architect, an extraordinary experience designer, a premier placemaker, an amazing author, and a fast friend. Aat's 2017 book, *3RD4ALL: How to create a relevant public space*, is first of all a beautiful book, and also one that lays out the principles by which Aat architects the authentic and breathtaking third places for which he well deserves the 2021 Karl Preusker Medal. The book also guides all of us in how to appreciate such places and make them a reality in our own towns and cities. There is only one Aat Vos, but with the creative guidance he provides in *3RD4ALL* any community can design, create, and stage their own third places for all.

The term "third place" that Aat embraces so strongly comes of course from sociologist Ray Oldenburg's book *The Great Good Place*. He wrote about how we as human beings need places beyond home (the first place) and work (the second place); we need third places where we can gather, relate to one another, and contribute to while benefiting from public life. The subtitle of this book is the wonderfully evocative "Cafes, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day." To which we can add, thanks to the work of Aat Vos and his team, libraries. I think the rise of digital technology had largely pushed libraries to the side, but now they again come to the fore as great good places, as third places designed inclusively for people to sit down, learn, converse, perform, hang out, and just be.

"People" is in fact the first principle of Aat's designs and thinking on third places. He writes that "People form the catalyst for a third place. They should feel at home there. If they feel connected to a place, they will return and they will want to make a contribution. It is important that we do not exclude anyone, that third places are accessible to all." People are of course at the very heart of the Experience Economy, for only people have experiences! And it's not just customers. It's guests. It's visitors. It's users. It's employees and suppliers. It's students and beneficiaries. It's every human being. And each and every experience we have are inherently personal, for they happen inside of us, in reaction to the events staged outside of us. So to fulfill Aat's People Principle, reach inside of every individual to engage them in that inherently personal way, and thereby create a memory, which is the hallmark of any experience.

Aat's second principle is "Place". Calling it by the ancient Roman term "genius loci", he writes that "The place is always part of the story. Without places, there would be no

stories. And without stories, there is no soul.” Exactly right. Experience staging is *place-making*, which I like to define as “The art and science of turning generic space into a particular place.” I discuss placemaking not in *The Experience Economy*, but rather in our book *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. For as the world becomes more of a paid-for experience, people increasingly question what is real and what is not. They no longer want the fake from the phony, they want the real from the genuine. Authenticity is today’s *new consumer sensibility*, the primary buying criterion for what we buy and who we buy it from.

There are two standards of authenticity against which every place must assess itself. The first, self-directed standard is *being true to itself*. Does the place have integrity all the way through, or is it, say, fronted by a façade? Is it made out of genuine materials? Does it fit to and harmonize with its surroundings? Does it align with the purpose and heritage of the organization creating it? A “no” to any one of these questions can get a place perceived as phony.

The second, other-focused standard of authenticity is *being what it says it is*. Does everything one says about the place – in marketing, in press releases, in signage, and so forth – do they match what people encounter when in the place? Does it reflect the heritage of the locale in which it is situated? Does it embody the values of the organization? Again, a “no” to any of these questions could cause people to brand a place as phony.

Depending how individual people answer these questions for themselves – for authenticity is personally determined – reveals whether a place is Real-real, Fake-real, Real-fake, or Fake-fake. And certainly there are places that can be successful in any one of these four modes of authenticity. Think of tourist traps as Fake-fake, Disneyland as Fake-real (a fake reality), and the city of Venice as a Real-fake (for it is no longer a real city). As for the Real-real, look no further than Aat Vos’ work. He only ever architects the Real-real; that is the essence of his Place Principle.

But let me quote another famed architect, Jon Jerde, who coined and certainly popularized the term “placemaking”. In the book *Visceral Reality* Jerde equates placemaking to experience design, and then writes “What we do is design time.” Buildings do not make experiences; it’s what happens to, for, and by people *in* those buildings that create the experience over time. And that’s called dramatic structure. It’s the story! And as Aat says, that’s what gives a place a soul, as he exemplified in the Hubland Library in Würzburg, which brought forward the story of its heritage as a former US Army base.

Aat’s third principle is the one most near and dear to my heart, “Experience”. I am honored that the first thing Aat does in his book *3RD4ALL* is cite our book *The Experience Economy*. So let me quote him back, as he writes that architects and designers should “Make it better than home. Make it better than retail. Even better than Starbucks. Make it honest, informal, inspiring, different, and personal.” Amen, brother!

So let me add five elements of my own, with great overlap with the five adjectives Aat used. In the new preface to the 2020 re-release of *The Experience Economy* my coauthor

Jim Gilmore and I put the entire book in context by saying that in order to offer *time well spent* – for that’s what experiences are, time well spent – organizations must stage experiences that are robust, cohesive, personal, dramatic, and even transformative.

Robust. The most robust experiences are those that hit the sweet spot in the middle of the four realms of experience: entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic. And that is exactly what the best third places – libraries in particular – do, providing places that people *enjoy*, activities from which they *learn*, a place far different from the norm to which they *go*, and an environment where they can come in, hang out, and just *be*.

Cohesive. Experiences should themselves come together into one cohesive whole, and that requires an organizing principle, a *theme*. THEMEing sometimes gets a bad reputation because people think it must be over-the-top and fantastical as with theme parks, or in-your-face as with theme restaurants. But the best themes are in fact subtle, understated, perhaps even not conveyed to visitors. My favorite example is the Library Hotel in New York City, which I thought this audience would appreciate. Its theme is “Dewey Decimal System”, which informs everything in the design of the place, from the bookmarks at the front desk to the fact that every room is numbered after a particular library classification, with books and art objects inspired by that classification.

Personal. As Aat said, experiences *should* be personal, for again they happen inside of us. And customizing the goods and services atop of which every experience is built is a great way to do that, for customizing goods automatically turn them into services, and customizing services automatically turns them into experiences. If you design a service that is exactly what a person wants right here, right now, then you cannot help but make them go “Wow!” and turn it into a memorable event.

Dramatic. Every experience again needs drama, and that means intentionally designing all of the facets of the experience to rise up to a climax and come back down again. It was famed German performance theorist Gustav Freytag who first established the seven stages of dramatic structure in the late 19th century: exposition, inciting incident, rising action, crisis, climax, falling action, and dénouement. I know Aat has effectively used this model himself, such as in the Children’s Library in the Gütersloh City Library. But let me give you a simpler version: beginning, middle, and end. That’s the structure of every story, and stories again give places soul.

Transformative. You know what happens when you customize an experience? If you design an experience that is just what a person needs at this moment in time, then you cannot help but turn it into what we often call a “life-transforming experience”. And we only ever change through the experiences that we have. So many places – libraries included – have the potential to not just stage but *guide* transformative experiences, transformations that help us achieve our aspirations, to become who we want to become. And there is not greater value you can provide than to help someone achieve his aspirations.

In 3RD4ALL Aat calls his fourth principle “Product”, and now calls it “Program”, for the experience that happens in the place must be programmed. He says we must “design for

programmability”, a phrase I’ve used for years to describe how the plan cannot be a once-and-done static design, but intentionally devised to change, and changed cost effectively. Here’s where the principles of *Mass Customization* – the title of my first book – come into play where we modularize the goods, services, and experiences like LEGO building bricks. For what can you build with LEGOs? Anything you want, because of the large number of bricks of different sizes, different shapes, and different colors, and the simple and elegant linkage system for snapping them together. That’s what modularity is, and that’s what we need to do in designing third places.

Actually, though, the most powerful form of modularity is *digital* modularity, the realms of zeroes and ones. That relates directly to Aat’s final principle, which is, simply, “Future”, where he writes that “The next third place is virtual”. It’s zeroes and ones! He goes further, though, to say that “the physical world will adopt elements from the virtual world and vice versa”, which he designed most notably into the Cologne Public Library in Kalk. I think once again that Aat is exactly right. I wrote about this myself in the book *Infinite Possibility: Creating Customer Value on the Digital Frontier*, where I point out first of all that Reality will now and forevermore provide the richest of experiences. There are however places and activities that can *only* be experienced in Virtuality, that are simply impossible in Reality! Ah, but in the future, the best experiences, the most dynamic experiences, the most engaging, memorable, and remarkable experiences will be those that *fuse* the real and the virtual, that bring together elements of both Reality and Virtuality to form something new and wondrous.

And that is the future of third places, and should be the future of libraries as well. Do not confine designs to the physical but bring in the digital to go beyond space and time to find exactly the right opportunity amid the infinite possibility available to us.

And once again let Aat be your guide through his writings, his work, and his inspiring example. I congratulate you, Aat, for the change you are in the world. I further congratulate Dr. Sabine Homilius and your colleagues at Bibliothek und Information Deutschland for making such a fine choice as the recipient of the 2021 Karl Preusker Medal.