

**Book Review: Encoding Space: Shaping Learning Environments That Unlock Human Potential. By Brian Mathews and Leigh Ann Soistmann. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016. 176 pp. \$62. ISBN 978-0-8389-8825-1**

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**Abstract:**

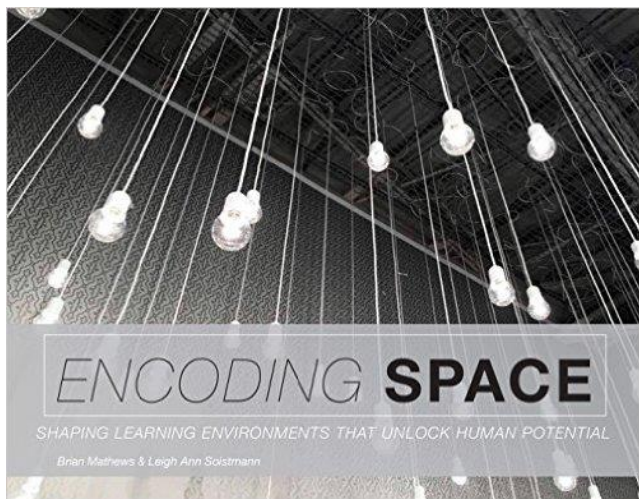
How much consideration do you give regarding the spaces in which you live, home, work or play? And do you consider other spaces or landscapes that you pass through, shop in, interact with others or sometimes, simply exist in? What about those spaces stirs your emotions or provides a sense of inspiration or better yet, encourages and motivates your mind and spirit? Mathews and Soistmann can help you answer those questions with their study and evaluation of spaces that opens the door to learning, in *Encoding Spaces: Shaping Learning Environments that Unlock Human Potential*.

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**Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

## Book Review:



### *Encoding Space: Shaping Learning Environments That Unlock Human Potential*

By Brian Mathews and Leigh Ann Soistmann.  
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How much consideration do you give regarding the spaces in which you live, home, work or play? And do you consider other spaces or landscapes that you pass through, shop in, interact with others or sometimes, simply exist in? What about those spaces stirs your emotions or provides a sense of inspiration or better yet, encourages and motivates your mind and spirit? Mathews and Soistmann can help you answer those questions with their study and evaluation of spaces that opens the door to learning, in *Encoding Spaces: Shaping Learning Environments that Unlock Human Potential*.

As a former retail manager for 22 years, I am familiar with the importance that space plays in a shopping environment and the investment made to appeal to potential customers' higher consciousness. Generally termed atmospherics, retailers, food and restaurant organizations and a wide range of businesses study and contemplate many factors when designing spaces. A personal example for me was when I was a Barnes & Noble store manager and had the privilege of hosting Barnes & Noble's founder, Len Riggio, in my store who was conducting an interview for Business Week. I listened as he described the details of a Barnes & Noble store design as it related to the "drama" it afforded the customer and how that provided the basis for

encouraging customers to come to their stores repeatedly and then find their creativity.

Mathews has taken this concept to a higher level by providing a foundation from which space infrastructures can be developed and grown, optimizing the value that space brings to an organization's persona with a deep understanding of the human need for motivation and inspiration. The physiological term of encoding is to break down information or experiences into its root sensitivity of appealing to basic forms of comfort or understanding. Addressing basic concepts like harmony, balance, rhythm and ambience, Mathews makes the case for libraries to be designed for the future as domains of creativity, with the added resources and instruction that brings those ideas to life.

Leigh Ann Soistmann studied interior design at Virginia Tech and is a designer at Gensler, provided an excellent visualization of the concepts presented by Mathews, they not only offer encoding ideas, but also include demonstrations of how those ideas manifest themselves into practical application. Soistmann's philosophy of finding satisfaction in crafting designs in practical and sustainable ways is clearly evident in this work.

A term used within the library profession in recent years is "knowledge incubators" and the term is typically used as it relates to the future of libraries and the use of their spaces for providing patrons, students and stakeholders a place to be innovative and create new knowledge or outcomes from their efforts. Mathews envisions libraries as such and provides suggestions to design concepts that encourage this type of mantra. These suggestions include Showrooms, areas with multiple resources and processes to encourage possibilities; Studios, spaces that bring people together for collaborative purposes; Boutiques, areas that can offer specialized services that support and help provide a focus for ideas as needed; and Salons, an area that offers a social overlay to the construct of collaboration in order to simulate senses and broaden perspectives. Once again, these design concepts are all visualized by Soistmann, clearly and positively, in order to enhance to idea.

Mathews also talks about the environments in which decoding takes place and what kind of elements are important on the front end of designing those spaces from the encoding perspective. One such example is the environment described as *third place*, a term made popular by Ray Oldenburg as a social space beyond home and work that is important for people to gather and discuss ideas. Mathews proposes that a relabeling of such a space, to *magnet place*, could promote a higher sense of importance to the issues and topics under consideration by encouraging persons with shared interest or expertise to come together for a common exchange of knowledge. Other environmental

transitions are also discussed to acknowledge the changing migration of information into digital formats and more fluid avenues of use.

This monograph includes many more details to consider when designing spaces to inspire and encourage learning and the creation of knowledge. While addressed to a library and information profession audience, the concepts and ideas are clearly useful to a broader audience of educators who are also designing spaces for the education needs of the future. Encoding any space with the elements that help trigger reflective thinking or broadened points of view is a win-win for all involved, from designer to user.

Mathews completes his collection of concepts and ideas with a manifesto that appeals to all of us who work in or enjoy our library space for our academic pursuits. But more importantly, he sends the message to anyone responsible or interested in the factors impacting their spaces to open their minds to diverse possibilities of creating appropriate spaces. Matthew says, *“Encoding is our key: creating an atmosphere with the intended purposes, emotions and meaning. Give everyone a chance to make it his or her own”*.

Libraries in particular should find the nature of this thoughtful work encouraging. In a time when many libraries are struggling with who they are and how they remain relevant, Mathews has demonstrated for us the importance of the space first, with resources and expertise an added bonus. Financial limitations not ignored, reading this book and understanding the basic concepts proposed is well worth consideration for any library and librarian as we move forward, deeper into the 21st century.

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