Center for Spatially Integrated Social Science

Edward T. Hall: Proxemic Theory, 1966
By Nina Brown

Background

Hall, Edward Twitchell (1914–)



Photo courtesy of Kathryn Sorrells, 1998

The anthropologist Edward T. Hall was born in Missouri in 1914. The foundation for his lifelong research on cultural perceptions of space was laid during World War II when he served in the U.S. Army in Europe and the Philippines. During this time, as well as during his subsequent service as director of the Foreign Service Institute training program for technicians assigned to overseas duty, Hall observed the many difficulties created by failures of intercultural communication. Hall began to believe that basic differences in the the way that members of different cultures perceived reality were responsible for miscommunications of the most fundamental kind. Along with his wife, Mildred Reed Hall, he has published numerous practical and academic books on cross-cultural communication.

Innovation

Hall is most associated with proxemics, the study of the human use of space within the context of culture. In *The Hidden Dimension* (1966), Hall developed his theory of proxemics, arguing that human perceptions of space, although derived from sensory apparatus that all humans share, are molded and patterned by culture. He argued that differing cultural frameworks for defining and organizing space, which are internalized in all people at an unconscious level, can lead to serious failures of communication and understanding in cross-cultural settings. This book analyzed both the personal spaces that people form around their bodies as well as the macro-level sensibilities that shape cultural expectations about how streets, neighborhoods and cities should be properly

organized.

Hall's most famous innovation has to do with the definition of the informal, or personal spaces that surround individuals:

- Intimate space—the closest "bubble" of space surrounding a person. Entry into this space is acceptable only for the closest friends and intimates.
- Social and consultative spaces—the spaces in which people feel comfortable conducting routine social interactions with acquaintances as well as strangers.
- Public space—the area of space beyond which people will perceive interactions as impersonal and relatively anonymous.

Cultural expectations about these spaces vary widely. In the United States, for instance, people engaged in conversation will assume a social distance of roughly 4–7', but in many parts of Europe the expected social distance is roughly half that with the result that Americans traveling overseas often experience the urgent need to back away from a conversation partner who seems to be getting too close. At the level of fixed and semi-fixed feature space, the terms Hall uses to describe furniture, buildings and cities, every culture has similar internalized expectations about how these areas should be organized. United States cities, for instance, are customarily set out along a grid, a preference inherited from the British, but in France and Spain a star pattern is preferred.

Hall's work inspired developments in several fields. In the field of anthropology, he was one of the first to consider the "anthropology of space." Today, this is a robust area of research pursued by anthropologists interested in how the built environment expresses culturally shared ideas and sustains relations of inequality between people (Lawrence and Low 1990). Hall's ideas have also had a significant impact in communication theory, especially intercultural communication, where it inspired research on spatial perception that continues to this day (Niemeir, Campbell and Dirven 1998). In geography, Hall's work has inspired geographers to consider the importance of relative and relational, as opposed to absolute, space, and to ask the questions about how different human communities create and make use of space.



Edward Hall's Theory of Proxemics



Strangers waiting for a train in Oklahoma try to maintain at least 18" of personal space. Edward Hall's theory of proxemics suggests that people will maintain differing degrees of personal distance depending on the social setting and their cultural backgrounds.

Ideal Suburban Life Near the Turn-of-the-Century

The design of houses and neighborhoods is also governed by culturally specific spatial principles and aesthetic standards. An aerial view of Yorkship Village in Camden NJ, a planned community constructed by the U.S. government in 1918, shows the winding residential streets and central community park that epitomized ideal suburban life near the turn-of-the-century.



Top image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photograph Division, FSA-OWI Collection.
Bottom image courtesy of the Francis Loeb Library, Graduate School of Design, Harvard University.

Publications

The Silent Language. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959.

A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behavior. *American Anthropologist* 65: 1003–1026, 1963.

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Related Works

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Niemeir, Susanne, Charles P. Campbell, and Rene Dirven, eds. *The Cultural*

Context in Business Communication. Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing, 1998.

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