

Rep. Dean Phillips Testimony, Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

Thank you, Chairman Kilmer.

I am pleased to be speaking before this select committee because its mission is of great importance, so thank you for all of your work.

In all of my travels and visits with the good people of Minnesota, I hear a consistent message:

“It doesn’t matter if you’re a Democrat or a Republican – we want you to work together to make our lives better.”

It the same challenge that businesses overcome everyday, and exactly what I came to Congress to do – inspire innovation, promote collaboration and efficiency, and make things better for people in Minnesota and throughout the United States.

So it won't surprise you that I've been disappointed by the social, physical and environmental design of Congress, and the recognition that there aren't many spaces here that encourage collaborative and innovative outcomes.

And what I mean by that is real, physical space – the way our buildings, offices and public spaces are designed, to the very furniture that we use throughout the Capitol.

I came to Congress after a successful career in the private sector where I learned that social and physical design can be key determinants of positive outcomes.

So picture for a moment the typical office, cafeteria and public spaces in Longworth, and compare it to the most successful and innovative business and retail environments of the 21st century.

Think of your local Apple Store – the open floor plan, the way it removes every non-essential feature and puts nothing between people, products and ideas.

You see the same thing in the office layouts of Google, Tesla and thousands of other innovative companies that recognize the power of social and physical design.

Consider that the very foundation of Congress is a place for meeting, collaborating, ideating, representing and converting all of that into legislation.

And yet we operate in dark, compartmentalized offices that were the hallmark of the 19th century - designed to segregate, NOT collaborate. Similarly, our furniture is dark wood, leather, heavy, and tired. Our office space is cramped and uninspired, and even finding a simple meeting room is difficult in our buildings.

I believe we must become intentional about using physical spaces to bring people together. And it's more than a metaphor; it's integral to a successful legislative body.

Now, I'm not saying we need to tear down all of our buildings and start over – But as we look to the future and the eventual need for new spaces to do our work, it's my hope that we can look to the very best American enterprises for inspiration and even collaboration. Identify best practices and bring them to a place that surely needs them.

Moving from physical to social design, I see a similar opportunity to improve how Members of Congress interact with one another on a bipartisan basis - particularly in an era in which respect and decency are in rapid decline.

I believe it's time to re-design the entire new member orientation program - which represents a monumental - and currently missed - opportunity to foster trusting relationships among freshmen. This must be intentional, as it doesn't happen by itself.

We should begin orientation by getting to know one another, by participating in team-building exercises, and by allowing each new member to share his or her life story in a full group setting. Only through hearing one another's life experiences can we understand the lens through which we view our world, our country and the policies for which we advocate.

By sharing one another's truths, we can illuminate our paths to respect, trust, and eventually, collaboration.

Every member brings experiences to Congress that, if better articulated and understood, can generate significantly improved outcomes for the people we represent.

I ask that the Select Committee include in its final recommendations - improvements to the social, physical and environmental design to Congress. It's time to bring the very best of American ingenuity and possibility to a place that desperately needs it if we ever hope to function at the level that Americans hope and expect.

Thank you.