Alternative Design®

Crafting Culture & Belonging: Part 2
Episode 19 Transcript

Episode Description:
In this second segment of Crafting Culture and Belonging, we revisit the microbrewery, Ferndale Project, to learn more about how their unexpected challenges set them up to discover their culture. At Kimball International, we know culture can make or break our sense of belonging. It's no wonder Ferndale's taproom redesign translated their values and one hundred percent of employees reported they felt they could be themselves at work. But how do we translate the welcoming atmosphere of craft breweries to the workplace? We share the findings of our latest behavioral study conducted with Arigami that ties belonging, culture, and furniture together through the lens of neuroscience. Turns out furniture has a lot to do with belonging!

Kaelynn Reid: [00:00] As disruptions to traditional work continue. It's crucial to understand design's role in creating places to belong. And the many conversations I've had around belonging. I hear things like design has nothing to do with belonging. It's a human issue. This is HR is territory. And we agree sort of. In this episode, we pick up where we left off talking to Dane Bartscht, managing partner, and co-founder at Ferndale project, my local microbrewery, on how identifying their culture first led to a better taproom design in the end. The taproom where one hundred percent of the employees reported they felt they belonged, but that's no accident. Microbreweries have been social hubs for generations and there's compelling neuroscience that suggests the layout of the space. And yes, the furniture has something to do with it. Here to share our findings from Kimball International's latest behavioral study conducted in partnership with Arigami is podcast guest, alum, Ari Peralta. If you're looking for practical strategies and evidence-based design solutions that go beyond just talking about belonging, grab a brew and tune in. This is episode 19, Crafting Culture and Belonging – Part Two.

In our last episode, we talked about how the craft beer movement has a lot in common with today's hybrid work movement. Beer enthusiasts wanted better ingredients and more styles to choose from. And hybrid workers wanted better office spaces and more choice on how and where they work. But in order to craft beer, there's a fermentation process that has to happen in order to avoid the ingredients turning into hot tea. In the workplace, there also has to be this catalyst ingredient that starts the crafting of belonging amongst diverse employees with various backgrounds. That ingredient is purpose. We also discussed how microbreweries like Ferndale project have this close relationship with their communities. The businesses should consider emulating. With a variety of ways of doing this ranging from incorporating localism in the design of the space to potentially making parts of the office more accessible to the public, to completely moving out of major metro areas to embrace the charm of smaller scale locales. Just like we're seeing a lot of furniture manufacturers do at Fulton Market. We believe that opening the doors to the community could open the doors to greater belonging. But in this episode, we want the how. How can designers actually craft places to belong? And it starts with culture.

Dayne Bartscht: [02:26] And so the first weekend that we were open, um, it was insane. I still think that was probably our busiest day.

Kaelynn Reid: [02:33] This is Dane Bartscht, founder and managing partner of Eastern Market Brewing Co. which is the parent company to the craft brewery, Ferndale Project.

Dayne Bartscht: [02:41] I remember looking at the pictures and there was just nowhere to stand. We had, I think, four different points of sales and the line was just out the door. It was, it was an amazing day. We'd worked really hard to get open. And the community came out and supported us. And then I

remember we bought a bunch of St. Patrick's day stuff for the following weekend and we put it all up and then no one showed up because of the pandemic. And that's when I realized that this was going to be a big deal and really impact everyone. And for us, the hospitality industry.

Dayne Bartscht: [03:19] So we had it all planned out, and we opened, had a lot of success that first week, and then the pandemic hit. We had just tripled our team and had to decide what to do. Everyone else that I was talking to in the industry was furloughing or laying off all their employees. And for me, we did have that successful weekend. We had a little bit of cash in the bank and we had just hired all these people and it just didn't feel right to immediately jump to that conclusion

Kaelynn Reid: [03:48] Ferndale Project had opened its doors to immediate success. But also, to a pretty near impossible challenge, they'd have to face for the next year and a half. And like we said, in our last episode, part of the magic of breweries is their taproom experience. That seemingly effortless ability for them to be a community hub that attracts locals and tourists alike. But how can you do that if you can't be in person?

Dayne Bartscht: [04:11] So kind of the Monday after the pandemic, we got everyone together and I told the team, we have two options. One is we can all pause and take a break. Um, we can look at unemployment options or two, we can try to make this work, but it's going to be difficult. It's going to be some long hours. We have to get really creative and think outside the box.

Kaelynn Reid: [04:31] Turning the brewery into a place to belong just wasn't in the cards, especially when in March of 2020, place was considered pretty volatile and unsafe, unless it was in the four walls of your home. But that wasn't Ferndale Projects only challenge.

Dayne Bartscht: [04:46] We essentially took all the funds we had to take on the space. And so we didn't really have much for much budget for any changes or design.

Kaelynn Reid: [04:57] So, with no budget for design and no people to serve, Ferndale Project was set up beautifully to discover their culture.

Dayne Bartscht: [05:08] And much to my amazement, 43 of our 45 employees were like, let's do this. And so essentially every day I challenged the team to come up with a new business concept every day that we would launch for 10 days. And a lot of those ideas have now morphed into businesses that we have now. And the way the team responded was amazing. And that led to what Ferndale Project became. I think the most obvious example is our pastry chef at the time that we had hired to do desserts at Ferndale Project started making vegan donuts and we made a drive through. People would stand in the parking lot, and they would sell out every day and that eventually became what's now Duke Donuts. And we have a brick-and-mortar location down in Detroit right across from Comerica and we still sell donuts at Ferndale Project. We acquired a coffee company and that led to the cafe component of Ferndale Project. And so as difficult as the pandemic was, we learned a lot about who we were and who we wanted to be over 2020 and 2021. I will say that I still, by the end of 2021, I felt like I understood what our culture was, but I couldn't define it.

Kaelynn Reid: [06:21] Dane wasn't the only one grappling with identifying their company culture during the pandemic. And especially after the great resignation, everybody was trying to identify their culture and for good reason. For the better part of three years, we've all been on a journey of inclusion, trying to wrap our arms around the sense of belonging, knowing that it's tied to increases in job performance, engagement, and overall company success. But here's the problem...

Ari Peralta: [06:50] Most employees today are reporting some lack of belonging, and there's been significant research from my alma mater from Harvard, specifically with Harvard Business Review, also

with MIT Sloan, really designating that belonging is the key to business productivity in 2022, 2023, and beyond.

Kaelynn Reid: [07:12] This is Harvard neuroscientist sensory designer and founder of award-winning research studio Arigami, Ari Peralta.

Ari Peralta: [07:21] I think, countrywide where there has been such a great focus and emphasis on inclusivity and on other kind of new parameters, if you will, on inclusion and diversity, but people seem to lack a sense of belonging at work. So, let's go deeper with these questions because something's not working and we're talking about these things but why isn't it translating into an increased sense of belonging?

Kaelynn Reid: [07:54] Maybe in all the buzz about belonging you've said to yourself, yeah, but this is an HR issue. It's about the day-to-day details, better communication, and recognition. This isn't about design. And according to data from quantum workplace, only twenty-eight percent of employees experience culture most strongly through the physical workplace. And while that might make you doubt the association between design and belonging, let me tell you my theory. Well, business leaders are talking about flashy, new renovations that will include ping pong tables. None of that matters to employees unless you've gotten the human part. Right? First, design can't be a substitute for poor culture, but it can reflect a strong culture and it can strengthen belonging. Especially when you get into the data.

Ari Peralta: [08:42] So, since August of 2022, we've been working with Kimball International. Arigami has been conducting a behavioral study, basically exploring the relationship between sensory design, furniture, and a sense of belonging. So, part of our research really was all about understanding and leveraging what we do know about the human being, and neuroscience is such a fascinating field because it covers so many different disciplines of science, but it's all around the nervous system, particularly our brain. What are the neuroscientific principles that we can apply to better understanding what motivates people? And I think you really are going to create a question. That is worth asking is that is productivity a trap today? Are we as human beings innately motivated by the word productivity or by what it represents? No. But we are motivated by things like culture and need to belong, which are part of our evolutionary story.

Kaelynn Reid: [10:03] We've heard from many designers that creative solutions for attraction and retention are some of the biggest requests made. And a lot of businesses understand the way to get that is to have a healthy company culture and a work environment where employees feel they belong. But even with that knowledge, sometimes it feels like the real ask at the end of the day is more productivity. But Ganzler recently came out with this incredible article, asking if we're sufficiently unproductive. In other words, have we prioritized productivity? To the detriment of the casual conversations that support things like belonging and well-being. Unproductivity is innately human.

Ari Peralta: [10:43] And this is where we've connected culture, as you said, as the lifeblood of society. We're not talking about religion. We're not talking about language. We're talking about when you boil down need and sense of belonging to its essence. We are tribal. It's part of who we are and where we come from. And I think in the future, we're going to be talking much more about cognitive capital and performance more than productivity. It's a deep conversation and an important one, but for AI, it makes sense to talk about productivity. For human beings, it makes sense to talk about belonging. It makes sense to talk about culture. It makes sense to talk about emotional intelligence and cognitive capital, because these are the things we are. It's just tapping into them. And these are the things that, in my opinion, are what distinguishes the authenticity behind this study and any other study we've seen in the furniture, architecture, and interior design space around belonging. We did not want to regurgitate the past. We wanted to build on those principles. And this is where culture became a common denominator.

Kaelynn Reid: [12:06] Ethan Molech and associate professor at Wharton was recently quoted saying one of the most interesting aspects of our current AI moment. Is it several billion people just got free interns. And while this episode isn't about AI, here's what I think designers should be watching for. AI has a potential to unlock greater opportunities for that unproductivity Gensler talks about with AI, potentially automating certain aspects of our jobs and freeing up more time. We may see the adoption of things like the four day workweek or even more interestingly, a greater focus on workplaces being designed exclusively for human experiences, experiences that cater to things like belonging.

Dayne Bartscht: [12:49] So the, the values that we defined over the last couple of years that are shared across all our locations are to be intentional, stay scrappy, and spread kindness. And so those are the three things that we want, no matter what location you go to, you're going to see those three things from our employees. But we also realized, depending on where you are and which location you're at, there might be other elements, they might be perceived in different ways, um, or there might be additional values that are tied to them. And so, I do think the experience we had at Ferndale Project, in particular, really all of them, but in particular I'd say be intentional and stay scrappy. We learned a lot from Ferndale Project and going through the pandemic and kind of what we experienced there. So, the remodel very much was the be intentional value. And then Ferndale Project having to go through the pandemic and make it work and getting through it without laying off any employees and actually growing really spoke to our scrappiness.

Kaelynn Reid: [13:43] I think this might be one of my favorite ways for a company to define their culture, responding to challenges. But many companies don't have two years to discover what makes them unique so we wanted to understand how designers could become translators of culture which requires them helping business leaders define it first so here's what you need to know.

Ari Peralta: [14:04] What we identified were these four main key findings. Each of these key findings gives us a sense of where culture's going and where we can help elevate design to become a translating partner for belonging and for human values that are beyond productivity, which again, I don't consider a human value. So key finding number one. Well, It's simple. Company culture, sensory design, furniture, they're just vital components to cultivating that culture of belonging. So those three things, when done right, whether it's in a microbrewery, whether it's in a farm to table club, or everything in between, they have these things, these three factors in common. The second key finding for us was that when you look at cultures in terms of company culture, and when we say that, we're talking about their values, their style, their, their way of representing who they are and what they do. Well, belonging changes based on the company culture. So, each culture type had its own distinct design and furniture needs.

Kaelynn Reid: [15:21] We identified five unique culture types. The first is classic culture. Which is marked by a traditional structured hierarchy and commitment to productivity. And most often for most onsite work. The next is collective culture. Which places, a really strong emphasis on customer satisfaction and a collaborative work ethic. It's really flexible. And it's operations and roles, and often promotes hybrid work models. The harmonizer culture is next and they thrive by working as a team with a core focus on employee happiness. This culture is often the one who prioritizes frequent team outings, meaningful feedback, and a work-life balance hybrid and remote options are welcome here. Next up the trailblazer culture is characterized by the relentless pursuit of innovation. It thrives on pushing the envelope and requiring employees to lead the way this culture also promotes hybrid and remote work options. And finally the adaptor culture often demonstrates perseverance and adaptability effectively navigating changes in the market. This culture is resourceful, resilient, and often has variable sources of funding, which makes it adaptable and financial strategies as well. They're also most likely to have a fully remote team that works from home and while you may find your workplace clients fit into one or several of these different culture types the approach to designing a space for each of them is unique.

Ari Peralta: [16:45] So, we noticed that some cultures were really looking more for ergonomic features while others were looking for a more sensorial stimulation. So, this research really allowed us to then go deeper and look at the design needs. By job role and work tasks across those cultures, and this is where we found our third key finding that those design needs then they vary again by the most in demand elements, which includes spaces, flexibility and spaces, specific furniture and tech that facilitate people to do their work. So go figure, it's not that challenging to increase belonging at work. One, let's listen. Two, let's align our values and ensure it translates well with design so that it's seamless. But third, give people the furniture and tools and training they need to do their work.

Kaelynn Reid: [17:45] I didn't get to speak to Dane about this, but I put my money on Ferndale Project being an adaptor culture, given how they rose to the pandemic challenge with new business ideas that shaped their values of kindness, intentionality, and staying scrappy. And once they identified who they were as a company the design of course needed to be a direct reflection of that culture to do this the design the taproom to be a little bit of everything.

Dayne Bartscht: [18:12] So when it came time to renovate the space and make it feel like it was truly a Ferndale Project, we had a really good idea. When you think about space types, you know, you're gonna have, you're gonna have families. And so you're going to make sure that you have furniture that are different heights, and that can see larger groups. You're also going to have craft beer snobs that sometimes might be a little more introverted and they just want to sit at the bar and drink a beer and not be bothered. So, you have to introduce that space type as well. You're going to have areas where people come and they don't want to be on their phones. They're trying to get away from the digital world. And so, you intentionally leave spots where you can't plug anything in, but then you have people that come and want to sit at a cafe and they want to work all day. And so. We were thoughtful about introducing those different things as well.

Kaelynn Reid: [18:59] This was the aha moment that inspired the entire idea for the episode. There are so many different areas that cater to a variety of people in the Ferndale community . There's a portion of their patio. That's fenced in where we could bring our dog Barry to play with other dogs. And now that we have our baby, we're finding ourselves in the back of the tap room, near the kids' play area where we inevitably run into other parents whose babies are also experiencing the four-month sleep regression. But there's choice in where I want to be. There's opportunities for me to organically make connections with people who have similar interests or in a similar life stage, because the design. One of the space, set that up for me. It's what breweries have been doing for years. And it's what workplaces can provide by ensuring no matter what the culture type is the right mix of space types is employed.

Ari Peralta: [19:47] We found that the greater the variety of space types present in any individual workplace, the stronger people sense of belonging was. So, just to give a number to that 93 percent. Of the over one thousand people that we did this behavioral study with had a higher sense of belonging at work when they had one or more space types at their workplace.

Dayne Bartscht: [20:11] One thing that I'm very proud of is we used to do a quarterly survey with our staff. We got away from it and we just reintroduced it. I don't know if it'll be quarterly, and it was around culture and values. And the, I think the, the question that made me happiest was that we asked, are you comfortable being yourself? And one hundred percent of people said yes.

Kaelynn Reid: [20:33] So, while the idea of space types has been around for some time, we now have evidence that shows that the amount of variety you include in a space is directly correlated to the sense of belonging. Employees will have. This is another testament to the power of choice. And we've all read the headlines that employees are demanding more choice. But what supports the function of those space types?

Ari Peralta: [20:56] All these different design considerations create part of the sensory design element that we're discussing. And what's great is that, we typically think of furniture just to sit on or to do something, but furniture is part of layout. Furniture provides different textures. Furniture gives our visual system, but also our haptic system, the ability to interact with different shapes, the ability to express and feel different colors. But then with things like ergonomics, privacy, and storage. This is where we start personalizing environments. So, the key finding number four was very important for us because there's only so much you can do with static spaces, but we are sensorial beings. So we wanted to also understand with the right furniture, understanding that it's translating the kind of culture and providing you the support, ergonomic and task related support you need to do your job. What about the environment? Can we through sound, privacy, through biophilic elements like light and plants, could we also help increase belonging? And what we identified in our research is that the more you personalize these environments, the greater the increase of people's sense of belonging at work.

Kaelynn Reid: [22:26] Personalization is becoming more and more critical when designing spaces, particularly as we continue to see technology giving us things like biometric data and feedback that will be expected to influence how a space looks and functions.

Ari Peralta: [22:41] I think it's important to be realistic and pragmatic, right? Because it's very easy to talk in an elusive way about personalization, in particular when it comes to space, right? Because there's only so much we can do. But when we get into these perceptual elements. I think we have a great opportunity because again, furniture plays a commanding role in all of these environments. And if we look to nature, why is nature so calming to us? It's truly the diversity and stimuli. So, if we just take that simple essence of diversity and stimuli and apply that to how do we foster environments that harness and cultivate belonging, it's creating the right sensory mix of furniture and almost micro environments within a space.

Kaelynn Reid: [23:39] For a sense of belonging to ever occur in our brains, we have to feel comfortable first. So, colors, finishes, scale, all this matters when it comes to the messages in our brain telling us, okay, I can relax. But the personalized solution required for this has to be tailored to the individual, particularly their sensory preferences.

Ari Peralta: [24:00] This is where we understood that there were four kind of key categories of people, that we looked through this sensory lens, if you will. And basically, this is how we scale sensory sensitivity. So, we identified groups by either them having low registration, and this is they either tend to miss or just take longer to respond to stimuli. There's sensation seeking category. And these are people who really look for environments that provide sensory stimulation. There's sensory sensitive people that they easily respond to sensory stimuli, but not always in the best way. Okay. And they're highly aware of their surroundings, usually very sensitive to things like sound or light, and then you have sensation avoiding, and this is about actively blocking sensations, which typically happens within our communities on the spectrum. But Kaelynn, this is neurodiversity. Neurodiversity is not about a condition. It's about the differences in human experience, but we're still talking about it as if it were a disease, and it's just this group of people that can't be stint. No employers, designers, architects, et cetera, need to take into account today is that we have low registration sensory seeking, sensory sensitive, and sensory avoiding employees filling our companies. So, one of the things we noted in our research was that the percentage of distribution of these people were just about equal across sector and across cultures. So, this is what companies need to focus on. How do we create a safe space for not just those high sensitive people or for those sensory avoiding people, but for each one of these categories.

Kaelynn Reid: [26:00] So, while there's a surprising amount of science to discover around the evolutionary need to belong, you don't need to look much further than roughly 10 miles or so to find inspiration. At least for the 80 percent of Americans who live within 10 miles of a brewery. A majority of those being microbreweries. When you design places to belong, keep these key takeaways in mind. Remember the craft of belonging, the intentional fermentation that has to happen with people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Employees want to rally around shared purpose goals or interests. Colleen quoted Dr. Jackson Beckam the equity and inclusion partner for the Brewers Association, who said it's not just about inviting people to the dance. It's about inviting people to dance. Designers have the unique power in designing spaces that foster organic connections. Key takeaway two is about understanding community's role in belonging, both internally and externally. It's more than just hosting a give back day or running a charity campaign. This is about encouraging officers to become less exclusive and potentially reimagine how unused space could be utilized in the future. With so many business leaders grappling with whether to downsize or not. Maybe we consider using that newly freed up space to serve the needs of the surrounding community. Instead of continuing to see the traditionally insular office, we could see companies begin to offer publicly accessible spaces that could open new revenue streams and new collaborations with say universities or even hospitals. In taking a page from the microbrewery playbook, perhaps opening the doors to the local community could be opening the doors to belonging. Key takeaway three is all about culture. This lifeblood of society. That's an integral piece of belonging. The workplace is home to a variety of culture types, ranging from legacy companies who love tradition to kickstarters that thrive on rooms full of whiteboards and late night ramen delivered to the office. And while each culture may have an overarching value set and our sensory preferences that designers can cater to keep in mind that the humans who make up that culture are bio individual. They have unique needs based on what tasks they're performing in the moment and how much sensory input they'll need to thrive. Which leads me to our final key takeaway use designed to personalize with employees needing. With employees needing a range of sensory experiences to promote comfort. Make sure to include spaces for the range of neurodiverse needs that are present. Not just the ends of the spectrum. We're gaining more and more access to these kinds of data. The designers will begin to leverage, to shift interior spaces to the individual sensory preferences required for things like belonging, for collaboration, for focus and so much more. Imagine a world very soon where office spaces adapt to the user with things like infinite, configurable layouts, lighting, schemes to enhance well-being and binaural beats proven to optimize creativity, all in a high fidelity high impact experience that will enhance the sense of belonging. But for now, the next time you enjoy a pint at your local brewery remember that belonging is a subjective human emotion influenced by the intentional application of design. That's it for this episode, if you're interested in more alternative sources of inspiration and the future of design, hit the subscribe button wherever you get your podcasts. And if you enjoyed this episode, we would love for you to leave us a review. A big, thank you to our guests for the special two-part episode, Dane Bartscht, Coleen Miles, and Ari Peralta. Thanks to senior foresight manager Mark Bryan at Future Today Institute for helping us learn and adapt their signal collection trend development and scenario frameworks as we develop the content for these episodes. This episode was produced by myself, Andrew Reid, and Brandy Small. Audio production and scoring done by Andrew Reid, and of course the Alternative Design podcast is brought to you by Kimball International.