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Where Shall We Meet?

Inviting a friend to come to Lake Como, Pliny the Younger wrote: "Why not . . . hand over to others the cares of daily life, and, in this lofty, shaded retreat, dedicate yourself to intellectual pursuits." Now, at Lake Como and at a few other places in Europe and America, there are magnificent homes that former owners have given to universities or foundations to be used as study centers, intellectual retreats or conference sites.

Visitors to these retreats sometimes grumble a bit over the extra travel time required to reach them, and then find that relaxed and comfortable surroundings, day-long associations, and freedom from encroachment of other obligations make for a conference that is both effective and pleasant.

Living for a time in one of these homes that have been turned into conference centers sets one to contemplating the question of the ideal setting for a scholarly conference. Inevitably one thinks of the contrast between the attention that has been given to typography, illustrations, layout, abstracting, indexing, and other means of improving the effectiveness of written communication and the relatively little attention that is devoted to the analogous problems of improving facilities for oral communication.

Books and journals are designed, but meetings are held wherever there are enough beds and chairs. Large meetings are held on a campus in rooms designed for classroom instruction, or in hotels in rooms designed to serve for wedding receptions, bridge luncheons, sales displays, and dances, as well as meetings. Small conferences have the same choices, plus resorts, country inns, institutional offices, motels located near major air terminals, and, sometimes, an estate turned conference center. With a few exceptions, all facilities for large meetings or small conferences have in common the characteristic that they were intended for something else.

Among the persons who have proposed that facilities be specifically developed for conference use is A. T. McPherson, associate director of the National Bureau of Standards. Focusing attention on the conference type of meeting instead of the large convention, McPherson proposes the construction of a few conference centers with rooms and facilities specifically designed for the holding of scientific and scholarly discussions.

Some of the questions that would have to be decided are these: How would the ideal conference room be arranged? What variety of sizes will be needed? What recording, projection, interpretation, reproduction, and other aids should be installed? What are the best locations? (McPherson suggests National Parks.) Are the advantages of isolation great enough to offset the necessary increases in travel time? Could conference sites be financially self-sustaining?

If symposia, conferences, and other such gatherings are as useful a means of communication among scholars as their frequency suggests, is it not time to tackle such questions? A great deal of thought has gone into the problems of making written communication more effective. Why should oral communication among scholars almost always have to take place in buildings that were designed for some other purpose?—D.W.