

The Office

Frank Duffy traces four decades of commercial office design as a mirror of commercial values



A Beginning

When John Winter, with his SOM background, gave us fourth year students at the AA School in 1962 an office building to design on a site in Chancery Lane on the edge of the City, it was quickly made very clear that the models we were meant to follow were all North American and all very glamorous, such as: Lever House, the Seagram Building, Union Carbide in New York and Inland Steel in Chicago. The Smithsonian's urbane but comparatively modest Economist Building in London was yet to be completed. Most contemporary British offices such as Centrepont, the upper storeys of which were just becoming visible from Bedford Square, looked clunky, gauche, provincial and commercial – which is, of course, exactly what they were.

Very few of the students had ever worked in an office of any size. Nor had we much of a clue about commerce although most of us suspected that it was money grubbing and horrible. We had only the faintest inkling that we were on the threshold of the cybernetic revolution that would change the world of work. What caught my eye as I sat at my drawing board in the fourth year studio, wondering how to begin, was a tiny piece by Reyner Banham in the latest *Architectural Review* about a new German phenomenon called 'bürolandschaft', office landscaping.

A plan of a typical floor of a new office building in Nordhorn (see above) accompanied the text. The building's form was excitingly non-orthogonal. The interiors were rich in informal break areas, elegant planters and carpet! Workplaces were not arranged in regimented rows, like contemporary American offices, but in an organic and free flowing pattern following, as Banham's text explained, systematic studies of

flows of information and patterns of interaction.

My eyes were opened even wider by visiting Nordhorn and other office landscapes in the following summer and interviewing Organisationsteam Schnelle, the inventors of office landscaping. The revelation was that office design had more to it than neatness and order, more than the luxurious and unprecedented spectacle of carpet everywhere, generous planting and comfortable rest areas, more even than novelty and style. Office design could only make sense, or so it seemed to me at the time, if it were based on an understanding of work processes and business objectives.

Theory and Practice

A few years later, as a Harkness Fellow and doctoral candidate, based firstly at Berkeley and then at Princeton, I was able to carry out research into the relationship between organisational structures and office layouts. My dissertation was, in effect, a considered reappraisal of my initial enthusiasm for office landscaping. By that time I had realised that the space planning logic on which 'bürolandschaft' was based may not have been entirely wrong but it was certainly limited and not universally applicable. Not all offices layouts needed to follow the same spatial formula: some organisations could for justifiably operational reasons be more or less interactive or more or less hierarchical than others.

Consequently a corresponding variety of design responses could be expected: for example office layouts could, depending on the circumstances, be legitimately more or less open or cellular and workplaces more or less sharply differentiated in terms of hierarchy. To test these newly articulated hypotheses,

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Frank Duffy as a fifth year student at the Architectural Association in 1964

within the bounds of my dissertation, I made parallel measurements in New York and New Jersey of 16 very different organisational structures and 16 correspondingly very different office layouts.

More importantly, when still based in Princeton, I had begun to work part time as a consultant for JFN Associates, a space planning firm in New York, much respected in its day. Here I learned more about space planning and interior design processes in ways that turned out to be far more illuminating than the labour intensive testing of my own, somewhat simplistic, hypothetical model. The Schnelles had sold office landscaping as a universal solution. They had also, given the norms of German architectural practice, taken it for granted that it was the architect's job to design everything to do with an office building, creating a total work of art, from the structure through cladding to interior finishes and furniture and eventually to coffee cups. The American office design tradition was, and remains, much more practical following as it still does the labour-saving imperative of a nation endowed with more resources than pairs of hands, so clearly identified by Siegfried Giedion in his masterpiece, *Mechanisation Takes Command*.

Design responsibility, to this day, is still allocated strictly in relation to the longevity of the designed elements: American architects and structural engineers being responsible for the building shell and cladding (30 to 50 years), other engineers for the internal mechanical, electrical and communications services (10 to 15 years) and space planners and interior designers for the layout and furniture (often lasting no longer than five years, given the rapid rate of the turnover of tenancies).

It took only a little mental arithmetic to work out that, over the four or five decades of the life of an office building, the architectural component can be demonstrated to be, financially speaking, a subset of interior design in terms of cumulative expenditure. More importantly, space planning and interior design, by their practical, hands-on responsibilities and their essentially highly visible and interactive methodologies, are much closer than architects and developers can ever be to the minds, hearts and practical requirements of ordinary office workers.

Action Office and its Aftermath In the 1960s a generous feature of a Harkness Fellowship was that Fellows were provided with a car for the whole of the two year tenure (in my case a huge, golden Chevrolet Bel Air) and were expected to spend at least three months travelling across the length and breadth of the United States seeing as much and talking to as many people as possible. In 1968, on one of our trips, we made a detour to Ann Arbor specifically to visit Robert Propst, the inventor and designer of Herman Miller's Action Office, then in the prototype stage of development. AO2, as it was eventually called, was intended to be a screen based product very differ-



Fig. 2. Conceptual layout of an Action Office for a plant manager.



Fig. 3. Conceptual layout of an Action Office for a research specialist.

ent from the orthogonal rows of the rather elementary, if sometimes elegant, metal desks that in those days filled the big open plan floor plates typical of even the grandest contemporary American office buildings.

Propst's thinking behind his proposals for Action Office, as he took the trouble to explain to me in the studio of his com-

ABOVE: Robert Propst's sketch of an Action Office for a research studio, 1966

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fortable Midwestern house, was for 1.5 to 2m high screens that would be arranged, non-orthogonally (like office landscaping), to provide as much or as little privacy as required and could be complemented, also as required, by detachable components such as worktops, shelves and storage cabinets appropriate to the wide range of different kinds of individual office tasks that he had identified and illustrated. JFN had played an important part in the initial installations of Action Office, the late 1960s fit outs of both JFN's Chicago and New York offices were early prototypes, and very elegant they were too in their initial manifestations. The best intentions can have unintended consequences.

The generic type of furniture system that Propst initiated so intelligently and sensitively has morphed over 40 years into a monster. The cumulative consequence of all his intelligence and design skill is the notorious 'cube' that is now practically universal throughout North American offices.

Cubes – high-screened enclosures that today surround millions of individual workplaces – are allegedly valued and jealously guarded by their occupants but, certainly from a European perspective, they appear to deliver neither privacy, stimulus, connectivity nor aspect. Instead they have become notoriously a kind of viral ecology surrounding and isolating

millions of unhappy, alienated Dilberts, all the way across the United States, from sea to shining sea; the disastrous and expensive consequence of rolling out without discrimination, understanding or critique of what was originally an extremely intelligent design solution.

What Next?

Change happens at different rates, sometimes gradually, sometimes in massive step functions, such as the contemporary impact on office design of universal, instantaneous, electronic connectivity that is challenging all contemporary assumptions about the stability of the relationship between space and time from the individual workplace to the city. Something similar in scope happened during the industrial revolution when the old agrarian calendar of saints' days and seasons was replaced in a few decades for millions of workers by the shrill, daily imperative of factory sirens and hooters.

The inertia that currently afflicts office architects, interior designers and space planners, working at every scale, has been fostered by optimistic assumptions of the continuation of an outmoded, uni-directional process of delivery. Why has the virus of the office cube flourished so mightily in the United States while Europe as a whole has been comparatively immune? Presumably it is because many more diverse office cultures have continued to coexist on this side of the Atlantic. Blind commerce has a lot to answer for.

Massive delivery on a continental scale must have been highly profitable for several decades to North American suppliers of office furniture and office products. It is harder to understand why such products continue to be attractive, or even tolerated, by so many millions of apparently indiscriminating consumers. When social and technological contexts provide evidence of unprecedented and rapid change, as they certainly do today, the dominance of supply side thinking is not just lazy, it is self-destructive. Nearer home we have similar problems.

Why do developers still believe that London needs more new, high-rise, deep floored office buildings? Conventional, commercial real estate criteria depend too much on precedent, habit and optimism and not enough on scepticism, imagination and research. The history of office design over the last four decades on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrates the necessity of constantly scrutinising all products and services at every scale, whether systems furniture, space planning solutions, office building types, urban planning concepts, transportation systems, for those tell-tale signs of decadence and obsolescence.

Without such continuing reflective scrutiny past mistakes will be repeated and badly needed innovation in workplace design in the age of information will be well and truly blocked. ■

