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Design Focused

by Robert M. Deering

Good design "talks" by affecting mood, giving information, facilitating daily life, entertaining, and inspiring.

From humble office buildings to executive penthouse offices, from bathrooms to boardrooms, there currently is a demand for careful attention to detail and design that has not been present since the early 1900s. Evidence of the importance and efficacy of good design can be seen everywhere, whether it be in high-level office spaces or in mass-produced consumer items. Consider the overwhelming success of design-enhanced products such as architect Michael Graves's household product line at Target stores, the rebirth of the Volkswagen Beetle, and the introduction of the revolutionary iMac, which saved Apple Computers. Such products are testimony to the fact that the average person—and hence the average business executive—is not only design-aware, but also design-focused. Just as they did in the first part of the 20th century, consumer products are having a definite effect on our built environment.

Nowhere is this impact more apparent than in the commercial office industry. While real estate and facilities departments of corporate America traditionally have focused on minimizing real estate costs (read: less space) to reduce operating expenses, the attitude that office design is a luxury reflects a myopic, inelegant corporate vision that in the long run defeats its own purpose. Increasingly, corporate America is realizing that putting design at the forefront of concerns about facilities achieves a host of marketing and business objectives. It helps create and enhance brand and image identification and, if done properly, can increase employee productivity, morale, and retention, and attract or expand a client base. And that, executives finally have discovered, can have a positive effect on a company's all-important bottom line.

Most significant, the workplace has changed as far as the flexibility of layout and planning as well as the use of furnishings, technology, color, materials, and lighting. When there is a clear design focus, today's office can be an exciting and invigorating place to work.

Space Planning: Curving the Square. Office space planning has changed drastically in the last decade. Rather than the rigid right-angle geometry of the past—whereby all walls and corridors were parallel to the building shell—today's offices rely on the dynamic, complex geometries of acute and obtuse angles, circles, and arcs to define space. Partially fueled by building shells becoming less rectilinear, this loosening of the planning grid has led to a more informal, easily adaptable, almost sculptural approach to office space design. Designers are being challenged to create spaces that stimulate users who are spending more time in their offices and who want spaces that are engaging and interesting, not just bull pens. Nowadays, many workplaces are purging the long rows of cubicles depicted in the Dilbert comic strip, replacing them instead with flowing, organic groupings of work areas flexible enough to be reconfigured for task-oriented teaming.

As for "people space," the enclosed office is making somewhat of a comeback. Driving this shift are employees' needs for acoustical and visual privacy, increasing amounts of analytical work, and high levels of telephone use. Many corporations are replacing open-plan workstations with slightly larger, "cockpit" offices that provide privacy while keeping square footage costs to a minimum. And it is not just the old-economy companies that are espousing this trend. Many high-tech hardware/software developers also are seeing this shift, particularly given their need for privacy and security for proprietary information.

In addition, interior details of workstations have taken on an element of flexibility. The days of planning one-size-fits-all offices are over. Employees are demanding more personalized and customized work spaces. Many corporations are accommodating this trend by providing a standard work space configuration, but allowing employees to choose from a menu of accessories or minor components that allow for some individuality. As a result, "company store" Web sites have emerged that sell products with which to personalize office space.

With the workday extending beyond 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., an office facility's amenities have become increasingly important. Informal recreation areas—offering basketball hoops, Ping-Pong and pool tables, miniature golf courses—as well as more traditional fitness centers, upscale break areas, and food service alternatives now are considered necessities in attracting high-quality employees. (This fact holds true even with the recent technology market correction that has precipitated layoffs among some telecommunications and high-tech employers.)

Furnishings and Technology—To Go. Flexibility in office facilities is evidenced in many ways; most obvious is the growing trend of mobile furniture. Desks, files, credenzas, and conference tables are being designed with wheeled legs rather than traditional fixed legs for easy reconfiguration of workstations and offices. Similarly, the recent shift toward more collaborative work in offices has driven the improved quality of conference and meeting spaces. "Smart" white boards that allow the printing of written messages, projectors for presentations, video- and audioconferencing, and even lounge chairs and recliners are common elements in contemporary meeting areas. Technology, which has enabled many current office trends such as telecommuting, hoteling, and hot-desking (i.e., when an employee sits at a desk just vacated by another employee) has spurred the creation of hoteling software packages that allow receptionists at facilities with telecommuting and hoteling guests to track who is in the office and exactly where they are.

Explosion of Color and Texture. The explosion of color in recent years has its roots in the proliferation of call centers in the 1990s. These massive facilities the size of football fields required large doses of color to overcome their inherent warehouselike qualities. Given the large amount of systems furniture in workstations today and the limited availability of built construction on which to apply color, accent colors have moved from the grays and beiges so commonly found in older office spaces to more intense, bright colors, with jewel tones and saturated hues. No longer is the shell a neutral color, with accent colors applied only to furniture upholsteries. Color now can be used to help guide occupants around their workplaces. With the size of building floor plates increasing to an average of 25,000 square feet, color has taken on a "wayfinding" aspect, helping to identify functions within a facility or various work groups within a general open area.

Similarly, the application of multiple finish materials in the interior design of work spaces has expanded dramatically, enhancing the texture and character of offices. Materials are combined in unexpected ways, often producing a compositional effect resulting from unusual materials used in traditional ways. Elements previously thought of as background aspects of an office are receiving renewed attention. For example, unorthodox uses of floor covering have been explored. No longer is it necessary to select one type of carpet for use throughout an office. Rather, multiple carpet patterns, textures, and colors are being used together as major design elements within a space. Metal, glass, concrete, and stone—once reserved for the exterior of built spaces—are being used for interiors.

Let There Be Light. Workplace lighting has drawn a significant amount of attention over the past decade. Variation, drama, energy-conservation concerns, and ergonomics play a larger role than ever before. Rather than bathing an entire space in bland fluorescent light, designers are using multiple types of light, such as incandescent, halogen, low-voltage, and natural light sources, to achieve variation. Not only does variation in illumination allow creativity in the effects of light, but also the fixtures themselves have become design elements. Indirect or ambient lighting has gained popularity as a primary method of illuminating the workplace, due largely to the fact that it does not produce glare on computer screens. In addition, indirect lighting technology is having an effect on energy consumption, providing a reduction in operating expenses greater than that offered by the traditional direct parabolic fluorescent fixtures commonly found in office buildings.

Natural lighting also is assuming a more prominent position in the design of office space. While Europeans have long been legally required to provide some degree of natural lighting for all employees in a space, Americans are just beginning to realize the importance of natural light in regard to employee morale. Many corporations are moving their enclosed offices away from perimeter walls to the interior of a space, allowing a more democratic use of windows while lowering operating expenses through reduced use of artificial lighting. Rising energy costs, sustainable design initiatives, and conservation legislation also are fueling the trend toward the increased use of natural light in workplaces.

Innovative retailers, manufacturers, entertainment companies, and cultural institutions all have added value to their bottom line by creating and promoting distinctive office design and architecture. Buildings, interiors, and objects, when they are well designed, communicate concepts, ideas, and images. Good design "communicates" by affecting mood, giving information, facilitating daily life, entertaining, and inspiring. Design of a physical environment should be tailored to an

organization's mission and guided by the intangible "feel" of a space: what makes it stimulating and engaging, instead of banal and mundane. The feel of a design is as important an investment as the functionality of a workplace.

The financial impact of good design has become apparent to those traditionally concerned only with reducing expenses to better the bottom line. A 1998 study by the American Society of Interior Designers reported on the impact of interior design on the bottom line, focusing on a Detroit-based insurance company that designed its new office to incorporate team structures, ergonomic furniture, improved privacy, and state-of-the-art environmental systems. Pre- and postoccupancy evaluations, performed in 1994 and 1996, respectively, showed a 137 percent decrease in the time required to process client paperwork, a 9 percent drop in errors and defective claims, and a drop in absenteeism from 4.4 to 1.6 percent.

In the rapidly changing speed-to-market commercial environment, good work space design can give firms a strong sense of identity and corporate image, allow for flexibility to meet changing physical needs, enable workers to interact more effectively with one another, and help to boost productivity. Good work space design can be seen as more than just aesthetics—it also can show good business sense.

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FEATURE BOX

Three Solutions

The following projects are examples of how client culture, vision, and the workplace have been aligned in an effort to enhance performance and create a flexible infrastructure.

Krusinski Construction Company, Oak Brook, Illinois. The interior design goal for Krusinski Construction was to create a new, progressive-looking work space that would distance the company from its too-gray geographic environment. The facility also was to be a showplace that would demonstrate the company's range of capabilities and quality of work to current and prospective clients. Furthermore, the company wanted to create a shared, open work area for its project managers—a considerable cultural change.

As one enters the company's building, the reception desk is located immediately to the left, anchoring one end of a "street" that cuts diagonally across the space to the project managers' "town square." The long, open sight line was designed to satisfy the need for the receptionist to see the project managers' area. On the left side of the "street" is a gallery wall where visitors can view photos of projects the company has completed. On the right side of the "street," a curved wall of stainless-steel panels invites entry into a client conference room designed for formal presentations.

Behind the wall is an open area for administrative and accounting staff that affords a direct view of the front entrance in case the need arises to cover for the receptionist. Since these employees spend long hours at their desks, they were given space along the windows. The balance of space with windows was allocated to senior management and staff conference rooms. Interior walls of clear and sandblasted glass in these areas allow natural light to enter.

At the far end of the "street" lies the project managers' "town square." To help mitigate the impact of the project managers' loss of their private offices, generous 10-by-11-foot work spaces were created, with full-height walls in between. The workstations open to a large, shared group work area conducive to frequent informal meetings and an ongoing exchange of ideas. This area is separated from the perimeter circulation at the far end of the room by full-height glass panels that act as a buffer from the corridor, while allowing natural light to enter and permitting visual contact with the outside. A circular opening in the ceiling of the area suggests that this is the center of activity—the heart of the operation. The carpet pattern reinforces the town square concept, mirroring the circular opening in the ceiling and helping to define the diagonal "street" running through the building.

TiVo headquarters, San Jose, California. Full-scope design and furniture services were provided for 127,000 square feet of office, support, and data center space on four floors in two buildings that were received as shells. The company, which makes and sells personal digital video recorders that can store up to 30 hours of television programming, wanted to develop a "Hollywood meets Silicon Valley" design theme for its facility. Elements throughout the workplace highlight television and the TiVo box (the company's product), including a TV sculpture and interactive kiosk in the main lobby and a residential-style living room that serves as a demonstration room for customers. The editing

rooms are set off visually along the main "customer" circulation path, compatible with the company's high-tech nature.

For TiVo's new headquarters, it was considered important to project the interactive, family-style environment that helped develop the firm's business.

A gathering area known as the "town center" was created to encourage communication and to house the company's weekly "all-hands" meetings that occur during lunchtime when the entire company shares information on the company's latest developments.

The Parenting Group, New York City. The Parenting Group's new headquarters on Fifth Avenue at 44th Street will house the departments of three magazines: Parenting, Baby Talk, and Family Life, plus other related business units. The offices, located on the third, fourth, and seventh floors, with stairs between the third and fourth floors, will accommodate approximately 260 people.

The project started with an architectural program with input from interviews with department heads. The information then was used to guide test fits on two different locations to enable the Parenting Group to decide which lease was better for the company. The program also was calculated using the corporate space standards of Time Inc. to see whether significant difference in space use would suggest implementing those standards. The analysis showed that the change in square footage was minimal, which allowed the Parenting Group to build an argument for using its own space standards.

The design goal was to create a space that was filled with light and openess, and—above all—that fostered communication among employees. Private offices, all with glass fronts, were kept to a minimum and clustered around the building's core, which allowed more natural light to reach employees sitting in workstations, enabling them to see outside. Eliminating walls minimized barriers, allowing for easier interaction. The height of modular walls in workstations was kept to 52 inches. This height provided privacy to employees while they were seated but allowed uninterrupted views across the space when hey were standing. Overhead storage also was kept to a minimum so as not to block views. Where possible, workstations were placed away from the window wall to allow circulation around the perimeter of the space.

To allow for impromptu gatherings, formal and informal meeting areas were incorporated into the space. Sliding translucent panels could transform the room into a smaller and more intimate space if necessary. Lighting in the open areas consisted of indirect lights attached to the workstation spine, providing even, ambient illumination throughout.

The project addressed environmental responsibility in several ways. Low volatile organic compound (VOC) paints were specified throughout, and vinyl products were kept to a minimum because of their harmful effects on the environment. Workstation and office work surfaces were made of wood from managed forests. In addition to natural products—like cork and linoleum—water-based, spray-on paints, low VOC adhesives, wall coverings made of recycled paper, ceiling tile with high recycled content, and recyclable carpet were specified.**—R.M.D.**