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From forest to oasis: Innovating on the concept of workspace - by Dave Madson

October 18, 2019 - Construction Design & Engineering

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To encourage success, workplaces should be environments that foster wellness by reducing stress, providing flexibility, and increasing productivity.

With a new appreciation for the variety of settings needed in today's multigenerational workplaces, designers are becoming experts at creating dramatically diverse workspaces. From a construction company's boldly designed Boston headquarters to a high-end consultancy firm's airy high-rise, the range of unique spaces that allow people to do their best work is astonishing.

Innovation in Office Design

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the American workplace in 2019 has come leaps and bounds from the original open-office concept. The open-plan design was once lauded for the way it significantly reduced the cost of corporate real estate, but now many organizations are abandoning it in favor of a work environment that responds to authentic human needs. For more than 20 years, I have watched workplaces move from offering one-size-fits-all solutions to a wide range of functional needs to blurring the lines between office, café, hotel, and even home in order to provide a more comfortable, practical space for employees. The dramatic arc of this change is the result of professional experiences that are more varied, more competitive, and increasingly interconnected.

To support employees, companies' spaces need to work harder. They must offer the things that people want and need in a workplace: Rest, light, meeting areas, and a choice between solitude and social interaction. Because modern technology makes it nearly impossible to fully disconnect from work, employees need the draw of a pleasant and stimulating workspace to bring them in each day. It can be demoralizing to spend every day in a workplace that lacks identity, amenities, or flexibility. It can also be counterproductive to spend valuable time fending off constant interruptions and isolating if there is no way to organically connect with coworkers. Innovative workspace design operates on the belief that a smart workplace can improve morale, support productivity, allow greater focus, and create a critical sense of human connection.

Evolving Space Typologies

Growing up New England in the 1980s, everyone would shop for back-to-school clothes at the same few stores at the local mall and show up on the first day of school in a new outfit, only to discover several others wearing the exact same thing. It was a sign of the times, when clothing and restaurants offered limited options, and customization was a luxury only afforded to a select few. The same thing happened in workplace design in the 80s; options were limited, and we just worked with what was available. By the 90s, progressive offices had cubicles, meeting rooms, private offices (including the now-famous “corner office”), and often a boardroom as well. By the late 2000s, the most cutting-edge workplaces included napping pods, beer on tap, and gaming corners.

Now, customization is more accessible than ever before. Each company has corporate DNA that, blended with employee culture and basic business imperatives, should offer an authentic framework for a specific workspace design. The best way to avoid falling in line with homogenous office trends is to design flexible spaces that match the needs and tolerances of the culture they’re supporting, but still lend themselves to sustaining future change and growth for the organization.

Our firm recently completed two projects for two wildly different businesses, each with their own mission, budget, and culture. The businesses, as well as the spaces we designed, were far apart in style and origin. So, what do these new spaces have in common?

The Primary Condition for Design

Charles Eames once said that “recognizing the need is the primary condition for design.” It’s one of the mantras we work by in our world (and we have many). In today’s self-employed gig economy, it’s never been easier to avoid going to work in a place that doesn’t meet your needs, so when companies manage to secure a talented staff, they know they have to work to keep them. Business leaders look everywhere to grow their cultures in a way that make employees feel invested in the goals and aspirations of the company.

As workplace designers, our role has evolved from being reactive to the immediate requests of a company to including organizational exploration and cultural examination. How can we design the right workplace if we don’t know who or what will be there? We ask fundamental questions that help us recognize the needs of the space: Who are these people? What will bring them back daily? How can design boost the bottom line while keeping employees engaged and motivated?

Honesty in Construction

Shawmut Design & Construction, based in a South End office since the company’s founding in 1982, is a leader in design and construction. In an industry where technology is transforming how management teams work, Shawmut wanted to ensure that the next version of their Boston headquarters was designed to evolve with the company.

The programming phase took us through the typical workweeks of employees from every corner of Shawmut. In every major department in the firm, we asked qualitative and quantitative questions about employees’ unique working needs. It was an incredibly engaging process, conducted with an

open-door approach that kept our designers close to the people for whom they were designing. The highly inclusive, hands-on model meant that we were able to mold the environment around an increasingly diverse group of workers. The result of our research was a raw and beautiful down-to-earth space, designed throughout to support teamwork, efficiency, and excellence. Shawmut was looking for an environment that would support untethered mobility, where employees didn't necessarily need to be at their desk to work or be productive. The company also wanted a space that could accommodate variations in workstyle and employees' personal preferences, especially taking into consideration that different generations are often accustomed to different standards. With an arsenal of data from the field, we were able to identify a furniture "kit of parts" that worked for the entire firm. Each office-based employee now has their own self-designed module for a workstation and a quasi-private space for retreat during the workday. We saw the importance of creating a "touch-down space" – an unassigned, temporary space for employees to work – as an alternate option to employees' primary workspaces (or a place they would always be welcome, if they didn't have an assigned space). To serve this need, we created the Focus Forest, a quiet place with no phones or talking where employees could escape their formal workspaces.

The workspace we designed increased shared space by 250% while also providing areas for private meetings and independent work. More than 30 different possible workstation layouts give employees flexibility, and extensive tech connectivity lets them work anywhere in the office.

For Shawmut, the key to their space's design was variety and technology. With a number of their staff in and out from the work sites, the space needed to be tailored to the company's expectations going forward. "I truly believe our new space is changing how we work," said Mike Sanchez, Chief of Construction Operations, "We are looking to be the most forward-thinking construction company out there, and our space is helping us do that."

Identity, First Impressions, and the Elevator Exercise

The Brattle Group's relocation from a meandering space on multiple floors in Harvard Square to a high-rise in downtown Boston required a design that would keep the company's momentum going while preserving their core cultural identity. Rather than creating a space centered on impressing clients and visitors, Brattle wanted their new office to prioritize employee wellness, with the goal of creating a healthy and positive working experience.

To accomplish this, Brattle opted for a process well-aligned with their business model. A group of leaders in the Boston office with a clear and established sense of their firm's culture and the central needs of their business operations were the shapers of the new workplace, working closely with our team to express an overarching vision. Over the course of the process, some techniques emerged from the collaboration, including the "getting off the elevator" exercise. This exercise asked how the employees would feel at the moment they stepped off the elevator into their new office.

Through a handful of test sessions and feedback-based redesign, this exercise gave us the vernacular we used throughout the design of the 60,000-square-foot space. For a firm like Brattle, where employees can have very long days at the office, it was important to treat the environment differently from that of a traditional nine-to-five workplace. The resulting design capitalized on

interpersonal connections while preserving and creating unique spaces that represented the company's mission. Take, for example, the Oasis, a space conceived to evoke peace, solitude, and serenity. With sweeping views of the city and ample greenery spilling in from the rest of the office, this retreat was made to offer a break from the stress of office life.

Employee Inclusion and Clear Parameters

The true success of a workspace is defined by a design that authentically reflects the vision of the people who inhabit it. For us, a key success factor is understanding the source of the vision. It's critical for the design team to know where to find the right answers, even though those answers may change as client evolves.

We've found from some of our most rewarding projects that it's critical to make a roadmap clear to all of the client's participants from the start. Whether it's the client's internal leaders or the design team, someone needs to explain the limits of the project early in the process to employees who are expected to be along for the ride. Exercises like visioning sessions, employee interviews, and programming surveys can sometimes open the door to some pretty ambitious ideas. However, if everyone starts from a place based in practicality, we can explore new, fun, and even never-imagined possibilities for the next version of any workplace.

For those on the client side, staff turnover and generational differences mean that business leaders need to have their fingers on the pulse of their companies' authentic culture. Over time, the office's design will need to keep up with the changes that beset every company, both culturally and economically. Many business leaders think that it's unwise to include current employees in planning new workplaces, but in fact it's often the most involved team members of today who enthusiastically build the foundation for a workplace that will serve for years to come. The true experience of a space should be shaped by the people who will live in it. Not only will it improve the end result, but it will also bolster a natural sense of camaraderie and strengthen culture.

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