The Office: 1950 to the Present
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I n 1959 film director Billy Wilder built a 25,000-square-foot replica of an insurance office for *The Apartment*, a motion picture about a young man's choice between a lofty rung on the corporate ladder and the girl he loves. The set conveyed a potent visual language that reflected the values of the organization and its workers. Clerks seated at rows of identical desks, newly minted executives in glazed offices, secretaries positioned outside offices guarding senior executives, and signs of restricted restrooms and eating venues were implicitly understood by audiences then, as they are now. The main character's final reward at the end of his corporate success was a "paneled office with three windows," representing a familiar model, tenacious in its ability to linger.

The social and power structures depicted in *The Apartment* reflect a number of realities about white-collar environments at the time. All professionals were white men. Women were either secretaries, shop girls, nonworking wives, elevator attendants, or barflies. Power and self-preservation between the sexes were purchased to some degree with favors, both sexual and informational. The only minorities depicted in the film either cleaned the facility or shined shoes. In the soulless mass of conformity, the distinct lack of individ-

Jack Lemmon in *The Apartment*. Directed by Billy Wilder. United Artists. 1960. The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Film Stills Archive. Courtesy of United Artists

ual expression among the white-collar proletariat is in stark contrast to the privilege and distinction of the corporate elite. It is implicit that there are many ceilings that deter access to this privileged world. Walls, doors, and restricted facilities become visual representations of these barriers. For most workers there is a universal, bland sameness to individuality: one is a discrete unit, a cog. He or she is quantifiable, trackable, observable, and contained but not distinct. This environment is passively accepted by the workforce. Work is time specific, geographically fixed, and task oriented.

One must question where the roots of these organizational values originated. When did individual expression become divorced from the corporate environment? Why did forms of paternalism, groupthink, and group control become a tacit objective of the built environment? The roots of this tenacious model are most likely the manifestation of management theory, education, economic and social changes, technological advances, and architectural assumptions of the time. Yet the model is still pervasive and insidious. Forty years after *The Apartment,* issues of control, assimilation, the warehousing of individuals, and the use of workplace tools to underscore privilege and rank remain strong. That is why we understand commercials that appeal to our affiliation with power, and why we assume particular environments are associated with a particular corporate class. Though we laugh at the familiar world of Scott Adams's cartoon character Dilbert, do we not also find it pathetic that any worker would put up with such an environment? Is the bonding among contemporary office workers over this negative humor an effective means of avoiding personal responsibility for change?

1950 to 1960

An exact contemporary of the fictional *Apartment* set was the Union Carbide Building in New York City, designed by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. At the time, SOM's new interior-design department was creating interiors that were a study in precision. Union Carbide was a highly successful culmination of SOM's efforts to design and detail a rational approach to corporate architecture. The interior elements worked within a rigid planning module. The suspended, luminous ceiling, movable partitions, and partial-height privacy partitions achieved a level of integration that set a standard

Left:
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Union Carbide Building, New York. 1960

Below:
Manufacturers Hanover Building (originally Union Carbide Building)

and were highly influential in the development of interior systems and conventions. Many of these had appeared earlier in other SOM projects such as Lever House (1952), the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company (1957), and the Pepsi-Cola Building (1960). Though certainly Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Buildings of 1935–39 had an impact on the modern office, SOM is largely credited with developing the vocabulary and approach to designing the modern office.

In addition to Bunshaft, the contributions of SOM's Davis Allen in defining the modern office are enormous. Allen, a one-time designer with Hans and Florence Knoll's postwar company, was hired by Bunshaft and while at SOM contributed to many of the most notable interior projects of the time. Many of the people working with SOM to invent the modern office vocabulary went on to form design houses and furniture companies that created a virtual "Who's Who" among office-furniture designers.

The configuration of Union Carbide's office space was a physical expression of hierarchy that is recognizable and pervasive today. Status or rank was indicated by the size and location of one's office, the number of windows in that office, and the refinement of its furnishings. Clerical staff worked in open areas. The aesthetic was undeniably rational, a hallmark of the International Style that dominated American architecture. Individuality was subordinate to an overall exquisitely detailed expression of utility, efficiency, and modernity. To put the role of architecture and the individual in perspective, one might consider what Bunshaft once said: that social welfare workers were wonderful,

Herman Miller Design. Action Office. 1964–70

but they shouldn't be called architects. At the same time, his commitment to using architecture to expose employees to public art, amenities, and light on a grand social level is indicative of his desire to have a positive impact on people on a larger level.

The language of the modern office has roots not solely in architecture but in such things as the rise of management theory, technological innovation, and economic shifts. For instance, the ordered, rational, precision-obsessed office designs with their expressions of hierarchy mirror classic management theories. These theories date from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. The French engineer Henri Fayol, for example, focused on the division of work, authority, and the unity of command. American efficiency engineer Frederick Taylor developed a scientific management theory emphasizing the individual, performance, and output. And the work of the German sociologist and theorist Max Weber centered on rules, prescription, and a defined hierarchy. Among these theorists, there was an emphasis on controlling, monitoring, and commanding of personnel. Communication and information technologies of the day supported a linear approach to organization in order to record, send, isolate, and protect hard-copy information. As the economy became more focused on a white-collar workforce, the human effort to organize, record, retrieve, and create information became the dominant task of a majority of the workers. Between telephones,

adding machines, intercom systems, and typewriters, technology was kept fairly simple. Still, as early as SOM's Lever House, IBM machine rooms were beginning to be designed and a fascination with automation was starting to occur.

At the same time that *The Apartment* was being filmed and Union Carbide was being constructed, a German management consulting firm, Quickbourner Group, was proposing work environments not as a systematized, rational organization of boxes but as more fluid, organic facilities. These environments, besides being influenced by more modern management theorists, were based on analyses of communication, work processes, and paper flow. The resulting floorplans were extraordinarily free-flowing and emphasized work areas for groups, lack of barriers between management and staff, and efficiency. Developed in Germany, this open, free-flowing concept, known as *Bürolandschaft,* counteracted what many viewed as the sterile anonymity of rectilinear International Style plans. Special lightweight furniture products had to be developed to respond to the organic floorplans. Plants and freestanding screens provided only minimal visual separation and boundary markers.

Though one may view these environments as democratic, *Bürolandschaft* did not necessarily provide equality. Close scrutiny of the floorplans indicates that hierarchy was still expressed to some degree in terms of furnishings, location, and screening. Also

Herman Miller Design. Action Office 2.
1968–76

manager/staff relationships were not necessarily altered from a control and supervision model. These new spaces made it more difficult for individuals to escape the scrutiny of their managers than did the standard, cellular approach. Ironically, many of the issues that contemporary open offices grapple with—acoustics, lack of privacy, lack of individual control, and lack of status—contributed to *Büroland-schaft'*s failure to gain widespread acceptance.

1960 to 1970
The next decade would begin to cement the definition of the late-twentieth-century office. In an eerie case of art predicting life, the director Jacques Tati created an impersonal, cellular environment in 1967 for his film *Playtime* that mirrors the uniformity of cubical applications so prevalent for the next thirty years. This film debuted a year before the introduction of the original panel system of office furniture (forerunner of the modern cubicle) and only seven years after the filming of *The Apartment.*

The 1960s saw a proliferation of International Style offices. The acceptance of the SOM model (Union Carbide) and its adherence to planning grids provided an opportunity for interior systems such as suspended ceilings, cable and wire ducts, lighting, and partitions to be standardized and mass-produced. Nothing has had a more profound impact on the office environment than the advent of modern

systems furniture, a now ubiquitous solution that gave rise to the cubicle. In the 1960s Robert Propst, then with the Herman Miller Furniture Company, wrote the seminal book *The Office: A Facility Based on Change.* A reaction to the International Style, this book was a summation of Propst's research and a comprehensive description of future officing from a social, technological, and process viewpoint. With the assistance of the influential designer George Nelson, whose office furniture is legendary, Propst developed Action Office 2, the first open-plan system, which was marketed in 1968 (a 1964 non-panel-based system had preceded it). The system was modular; it lessened the need for tailored or customized design so prevalent in Union Carbide, and allowed the physical environment to accept change and be far less static. Propst's objectives supported a new degree of human dignity and control at an individual level, foresaw huge changes in technology, and, most importantly, underscored the relevance of individual motivation, work patterns, and expression.

Supposedly, Propst was influenced by modern management theorists such as Douglas McGregor, whose X and Y management styles were a study in contrast. Management style X was largely dictatorial and punishment oriented, discouraging individual freedom and expression. Management style Y trusted that people have a basic propensity to seek challenge, and it worked to develop high performance through encouragement and increased opportunity. Rather

than support an either/or model of cellular office or open work area, Propst looked at balancing the ability to achieve privacy, control acoustics, and create open access. Learning lessons from both International Style offices and *Bürolandschaft,* Action Office 2 tried to develop an approach to supporting a very different type of management. Sadly, the approach also allowed for extreme cellularization, standardization, anonymity, and conformity, which ran counter to its goals. In the years to follow, blanket approaches to literal warehousing of people and universal applications again would ignore the individual in terms of differences and de-emphasize group communication. The cubicle would come to represent a form of individual housing that neither provided privacy nor fostered interaction.

1970 to 1980
The notion of corporate control and a passive acceptance of the work environment by employees continued to influence work environments in the United States in the 1970s. The model of individual contribution and a balance of privacy, open communication, and adequate work tools may have been overshadowed by the size of large corporations and the ease of implementing and maintaining facilities that were more homogeneous in terms of workspaces. Highly detailed space standards were developed and implemented hierarchically. The visual language was as important as social control. Individuals did not modify their assigned piece of real estate; it was prescribed to them based on their value to the company.

Perhaps the most important work environment of the 1970s was Herman Hertzberger's Centraal Beheer Office Building in Apeldoorn, The Netherlands. Breaking with prevailing models of hierarchy and control, he introduced a democratic approach to the work environment. Rank was not expressed in the physical vocabulary, and individual and group control and expression of work settings were highly encouraged. Architecturally, there were several significant departures from the furniture systems model being developed in the United States. The basic planning module centered on group spaces rather than on the individual. Because the environment was to be democratic, the notion of providing a range of status-related standards for the individual was eliminated. While the American model was adding complexity to furniture-based solutions by incorporat-

ing utilities, the architectural solution of Centraal Beheer reduced the process of space-making by incorporating utilities into the architecture and allowing a vocabulary of simple furniture to be rearranged according to the taste of the occupants.

In the United States, several key design firms were highly influential in defining interior design as a discipline and business in its own right during the 1970s and early 1980s. Among the leaders and pioneers of this phenomenon were Margo Grant, former SOM designer and colleague of Davis Allen, and Orlando Diaz of Gensler and Associates, along with their counterparts at ISD, Caudill Rowlett Scott, and Environmental Planning and Research. Each of these firms focused on interior design, largely corporate entities, as a core business process. The acknowledgment and organization of corporate interiors as a stand-alone business proposition by this new generation of design firms led to many of the standard practices in place today.

An interesting blip on the office-furniture market, at a time when numerous panel systems were being developed, almost indistinguishable from one another, was the work of the Canadian industrial designer Douglas Ball for the innovative company Sunar. The Race System, as it was called (now owned by Haworth), was ahead of its time in solving issues of the technological infrastructure and reducing the complexity of office-furniture systems. It redefined the notion of privacy, allowing strategic screening while maintaining a high degree of visual communication. Its most important contribution may be that it broke with the fascination for modularity and puzzlelike precision that had so dominated the industry. For the first time, ambiguity and elasticity were introduced in an office-systems product that questioned the value of rigid standards and dimensional specificity.

The American movie *Nine to Five*, released in 1980, involved a backlash against the rigidly controlled model of the workplace that had become ubiquitous in the States. Glass ceilings, extreme supervision, and hierarchy were challenged in a coup by the working classes. Dream imagery included shackles being broken and sunlight spilling into a dark prison cell, no doubt representing the emancipation for which workers yearned. The "proletarians" were successful, and by the end of the film an enormous amount of diversity in terms of job sharing, personal expression, personalized

Jane Fonda in *Nine to Five*. Directed by Colin Higgins. Twentieth Century Fox. 1980. The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Film Stills Archive. Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox

Herman Miller Design. Ethospace. c. 1990

schedules, and the advancement of women to leadership positions had taken place. Oddly, these changes were completely overlaid on the original environment so that no physical changes to the office were made. The new multigendered leadership continued to be represented by large offices, and the clerical staff remained in an open, albeit highly self-expressive, workspace.

1980 to 1990

In the 1988 film *Working Girl* the theme was class struggle and discrimination against women in terms of climbing the corporate ladder. Though the young heroine ultimately succeeds, her reward is the very model of corporate America that dates back to 1960. She merely assimilates after breaking through the glass ceiling. Her rewards are a private office and an assistant, two conventional achievements that were perceived as an unconventional success story. Sadly, very little changed in the working culture; in fact, far less than in *Nine to Five,* filmed eight years earlier. The movie represented the decade in terms of greed, hierarchical focus, and ambition at all costs.

In 1985 Phillip Stone and Robert Luchetti published an article in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled "Your Office Is Where You Are," which became a mantra for innovation and forward thinking among those challenging conventional office environments. It may well be the single most influential document of its kind. Its premise was that office spaces can support a working philosophy but cannot actually create it. The office environment that they proposed presumes that management "has a democratic attitude toward the workplace and creates an atmosphere of trust and shared responsibility." In this scenario, the emphasis on employees went from an extracted degree of productivity to a fostered and supported contribution. Furthermore, the article questioned the validity of the cubicle and the type of efficiency it represented. It advocated activity-based planning, a concept where individuals and groups would select the appropriate setting for specific tasks rather than expect a single space, such as the cubicle, to be effective for every task. This called for a high degree of mobility, supportive technology, and far less ownership of space and management controls. Like Propst's *The Office: A Facility Based on Change,* Stone's and Luchetti's article anticipated technology that did not yet exist. Another important text was Cecil B. Williams's *The Negotiable Environment,* based in part on Jungian principles and Myers-Briggs concepts. It began to question the notion of control and conformity, focusing more on the individual and personal choice.

In the early 1980s the personal computer became widely accepted, and soon most white-collar workers had them. These new machines necessitated a complex system of utilities, which had an impact on building infrastructures. This new challenge to the workplace was solved by the increased capability of office-furniture systems. Perhaps the most influential of these systems of the 1980s was

Herman Miller Design. Ethospace. 1999

Herman Miller's Ethospace, designed by William Stumpf, which became much more architectural in its construction and ability to be modified. At the same time that the system could be modified to a degree by the user, it offered a more-traditional approach to closure and a less-temporary aesthetic than did panel systems. Perhaps most importantly it may have been intended to bring back into the office environment more personal meaning and context, which had been eliminated by the prevailing corporate aesthetic.

One of the first and largest users of Ethospace was the American Express headquarters in New York, designed in 1983 by Swanke Hayden Connell. This project represented the state-of-the-art in corporate headquarters: sophisticated ambient light, modular carpet, an impressive amenities package, a signature building, well-appointed individual work areas, and a strong art program. It was the ultimate project in terms of the application of products that are now being designed for the corporate environment, and its complex aesthetic was revelatory.

It was designed to be far more meaningful and relevant to individuals than the early offices of the 1960s; yet, in many ways, it reflected the hierarchical language of early SOM designed headquarters in that it was organized to reflect status and individual space. Modularity was its basic notion, though in contrast to the early SOM pure design rationale, the modularity designed into American Express was aimed at a broader degree of change and reconfiguration.

Despite the ability to reconfigure, systems furniture was to become so difficult to change and so expensive to reconfigure because of dimensional, structural, and technological dependencies overcomplicating the systems that universal plans began to be adapted by many organizations. This lessened even further the degree of diversity among work settings. It was commonly defended with the phrase "move people not furniture." Though there typically was some variation based on worker type, the idea was to create as much uniformity as possible.

1990 to 2000

A number of other important consultants emerged in the 1980s who have become catalysts in changing the concept of the workplace. They include Francis Duffy, Franklin Becker, Fritz Steel, and Michael Brill. As a group, the combination of architecture, research, and environmental psychology made a critical impact on what was later to be termed Alternative Officing. Of particular influence was Brill's *BOSTI Studies* and Becker's numerous publications and research on the workplace. The concept of alternative work environments was a total rethinking of how work gets done and what adds value to the organization. Within this mix, time and geography are far more blurred than in traditional environments, allowing work to be done almost anywhere at any time. Much of this would be achievable with technological advances to be realized throughout the decade,

such as wireless capabilities, mobile technology, and the Internet. An emphasis was placed on less-hierarchical, more-nimble organizations that focused on interaction and communication, and on the increasing importance of social connections. Unfortunately, many companies employed alternative officing merely to cut real-estate costs, and its continuing evaluation is clouded by insensitivity, poor change management, and cost-driven priorities.

Perfectly reflecting this cost-driven trend toward impractical densification, the 1999 film *Being John Malkovich* depicts clerical workers inhabiting a bizarre "half" floor in an office building, a peculiar low-ceilinged space wedged between the eighth and ninth floors, where employees walked about bent over to avoid hitting their heads. The space, comically reflecting downsizing and the disassociation of the human being from physical space, emphasized the lack of connection we make between work and the environment. Entirely focused on maintaining a highly favorable rent structure in downtown Manhattan, the situation mirrors the bias of much of the corporate world toward real-estate metrics and away from support of the work being done. This commonly held position is an insult to the innovations the workplace consultants mentioned above.

As an example, a popular notion to emerge in the late 1980s was the concept of hoteling, where space was used on an as-needed basis rather than daily by one individual. This concept was adapted early on by a number of consulting firms such as Ernst and Young, Andersen Consulting, and Price-Waterhouse Coopers. Often it has been applied narrowly to achieve real-estate savings rather than purposefully to support the behaviors and activities of its occupants. Though hoteling has attained mixed success at many types of organizations, it has become a controversial, emotion-driven issue for many workers. It represents the overall concept of alternative officing rather than being an option under the alternative officing umbrella with extreme variability in application.

Perhaps the most publicized case of alternative officing has been the multiple facilities of Chiat/Day. Though many other projects exist, such as the activities-settings-based Corning Glass in Toledo, Ohio (on which Robert Luchetti consulted), none caught the imagination and interest of the late-twentieth-century public more than Chiat/Day. Its New York office, designed in 1995 by Gaetano Pesce,

provided maximum opportunity for individuals to connect and work together. State-of-the-art mobile technology was employed; there were no individual space assignments; and the notion of hierarchy was stripped from the visual language. The design and aesthetic had no parallel model. It was the antithesis of Union Carbide in 1960. A value was clearly placed on high motivation, teamwork, diversity of ideas, and value-laden communication. Casual dress and television breaks were an accepted part of the workplace. Entitlements were transferred from space to other tools necessary to survive in such an environment. It was all about contribution, not some mechanical notion of productivity.

Despite the grand experiment, the environment may not have been wholly successful for Chiat/Day, considered by many to be the most extreme adapter of this concept. Whether this was due to unsuccessful change management, a mismatch between the concept and type of work being produced, or lack of fulfillment of some basic human needs is not really understood. What is known is that the Los Angeles office of Chiat/Day, opened in 1998, has made a number of modifications that diverge from the New York office.

Masterfully designed by Clive Wilkinsen, the Los Angeles facility provided an individual space for every employee based less on hierarchy and more on function, an enormous variety of work settings, and an aesthetic that has a sense of fun and a sense of humor. Wilkinsen managed to knit together concepts of privacy, ownership, image, motivation, control, and efficiency that have been the source of contrast and controversy between classic and alternative work environments. In doing so, he may very well have left a design legacy that will begin to define corporate environments.

Interestingly enough, "incubator space" has emerged in the last few years as a space type geared toward innovation and idea generation. It is being built for young, dynamic entities to use, yet traditional corporations are creating similar spaces distinct from their typical work environments to grow ideas and "incubate" innovation. Traditional corporations seem to be saying that innovation and change take place in a different work environment than a typical office space.

2000 and the Future

The work environment model of 1960 is still with us, and it remains potent today. The American office continues in many ways to expose the irony of American individualism in which everybody desires to be the same but expresses that desire in maverick terms. The dream of a corner office, of achieving status, etc., is as pervasive as it was forty years ago. A pattern has developed in the last fifty years; there is a tension between control and freedom, productivity and contribution, status and function, privacy and accessibility, and the individual and management. Much of the contrast between what SOM produced and what influenced the Quickbourner Group is alive today.

Still, it is a hopeful time to be involved in workplace making. We are seeing changes in how people who have never known life without the personal computer, the Internet, or cell phones, and who have strong interests in opportunities for personal success and quality of life are affecting the workspace. It will take changes in values and self-esteem to truly revolutionize the work environment; architects cannot do these things.

Despite the tenacious lingering of the traditional office, many of us are visualizing a new physical model that eliminates inappropriate class and power structures from the architectural language. We are dreaming of environments that send messages about opportunity, the synergy of multiple minds, the value of people, the inherent strength of diversity, and, most importantly, that emphasize contribution rather than archaic notions of individual productivity. Some psychologists suggest that learning new behaviors or adapting new beliefs are most likely to occur in the context of models that are unique, unfamiliar, and novel. Important historical blips like the Quickbourner experiments, Hertzberger's Centraal Beheer Office Building, Luchetti's landmark article, and Wilkinsen's Chiat/Day offices represent departures from prevailing models and what has been a quiet, constant protest and tension against uniform, authoritarian models over the last fifty years.

Considering this, the role of design as a meaningful and influential agent for positive change should keep our hearts beating faster, our expectations high, and our belief in the power of a renewed built environment. In the century to come we will have incredible opportunities for design to empower an entire workforce, greatly improve the quality of our lives, and reflect our basic humanity. In *The Apartment*, it was the promise of this humanity that spurred Jack Lemmon, the disillusioned young executive, to leave the vulgarity of the corporate world for Shirley MacLaine, a casualty of the corporate system. In the future, this promise may even be realized.

Note