

VISION OF A NEW WORKPLACE

A sketch of a new workplace which is now in
process of development by the Center for
Environmental Structure and Herman Miller

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ROUGH DRAFT

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TEXT

1. THE CHANGING ORGANIZATION OF WORK

ACKNOWLEDGING THE CASE FOR A BETTER ORGANIZATION. WE ALL WANT IT.

In the remaining years of the 20th century, there will be a sellers' market for labor. The baby boom is over. Good employees will be scarce. Management will have to try very hard to keep their best employees.

Many companies are now facing a new attitude to management, in which the participation of employees, and a more flexible, more shared voice in the life of the company and in the definition of work, is becoming normal.

<Most of the forward looking executives and managers are now convinced that this kind of corporation is necessary, from a human standpoint, to the proper conduct of business, and to the effective life of a company.

2. A VASTLY IMPROVED ENVIRONMENT

CHANGING ORGANIZATION CANNOT HAPPEN WITHOUT BETTER WORKPLACE DESIGN. WHY, BRIEFLY.

But the same managers who recognize the need for changed human organization on the management level, have often not understood that it is absolutely necessary that this change in management be accompanied by a parallel change in the environment.

The main reason for introducing The Personal Workplace is to make a major change in the comfort and efficiency of people working in offices. The long term aim of the personal workplace system is to revolutionize the entire physical environment we have come to know as the office.

Herman Miller has pioneered in the creation and manufacture of new office systems. Most American companies are now manufacturing versions of the system developed by Herman Miller in the 1950's. However, after thirty years, it has now become clear that the early office systems available in the period 1960-1990, have had a number of important defects in the way that they serve people. Chief among these defects are the following:

1. People feel alienated and inhuman in their place of work.
2. The poor quality of the workplace is not merely an aesthetic matter, but goes to the root of people's working efficiency. In many cases people have to leave the office to get any real work done.
3. Work-stations are cramped and isolated, yet lack privacy when it is needed.
4. There is often relatively little group feeling. The overall quality of the group environment is extremely bad: cohesion of the office as a social institution is virtually ignored.
5. Work-stations are repetitive and box like, allowing no creativity or soul to the individual person.
6. The quality of light is terrible. It is not only not daylight, but it has a harsh softness which makes people feel utterly dissociated from themselves and their normal happy feelings.
7. Many work-stations are empty more than half the time.
8. Absenteeism is widespread, and turnover of personnel is rampant. Many people feel they have to "move on" because they cannot find satisfaction where they work. Although this problem is of course dependent on management and work conditions, it is absolutely inseparable from the physical character of the workplace itself.
9. Productivity is low.
10. All in all, people's satisfaction is at a low ebb. Goals of real human creativity, of being treated like a person and feeling like a person, of being in a situation whose fundamental feeling is profound, are entirely missing for a whole generation of American workers. The widespread assumption people have is that life begins when you get home. The 9-5 work period is a necessary evil which people struggle through, to get enough money to enjoy the few hours they have with their family. Yet the fact is, that most human beings spend the greatest proportion of their waking lives at work, or in work-related activities.

It is imperative, that we begin a new generation of offices, in which work is a pleasure, and in which work and life are inseparable... this will not only help to solve the emotional dissatisfaction which most American workers feel. It will also increase productivity and lower costs.

From a human point of view, there is no doubt that these problems have their origins in human -- that is to say, in management -- conditions which exists in the workplace.

- * Workers are given too little autonomy.
- * They are given too little direction.
- * There is not a sufficiently comfortable balance of team work and individual work, so the sense of a team is weaker than it should be, resulting in feelings of isolation for individuals.
- * There is a big brother atmosphere caused by the fact that

managers feel they must be watching over their workers, to make sure that they are working.

* The resulting fishbowl atmosphere discourages initiative, and lessens the sense of pride of the workers.

* Individuality is often discouraged.

* There is a fanatical preoccupation with the image of the workplace, not with the actual work, so that appearances become more important than the actual quality of work itself.

* There may sometimes be too little participation, by workers, in setting the goals or directions of the group they are working in, with a resulting loss of comprehension.

* There is a lack of emotional ease, with the absurd result that many managers now report "I do my best work away from the office".

These problems are management problems. Many of them are well understood by managers, or by management consultants. However, they are extremely hard to change. In some cases, the changes required to make real improvements in these problems, require innovations that seem frightening or risky to managers, and the changes are therefore slow in coming.

But the overwhelming fact, underlying all these problems, is the fact that they are linked to the environment.

It is absolutely impossible to make these changes, at a management level, if the environment does not cooperate with the human changes, and support them. Most existing office environments do not support these necessary changes of management.

There is also a growing body of evidence, which shows that the physical environment itself can induce these changes. That is, even though these changes appear to originate from management decisions, it is the physical environment which creates the necessary mood, and subtle human and social conditions which will allow these changes: and that when these environmental changes are made, gradually the human changes follow suit, because the new environment encourages and helps to sustain the right kind of behavior, both on the part of managers, and on the part of workers.

The interaction of environment and human behavior is certainly not deterministic in the narrow sense. But there is a subtle "ecological" interplay of environment and human actions, which means that the right behavior will appear, when it is released, by an appropriately made physical setting.

The management problems described in the previous section all hinge on questions of autonomy, creativity, dignity. In a nutshell there is a contrast between an office in which a

person is expected to work like a cog in a machine, and an office which is like a privately owned business, in which a person works because he or she sees it in their own interest to work, and does it for the love of it.

Even when the right attitude exists in management, to encourage this kind of feeling among workers, the atmosphere is dependent on various key environmental variables, which show up directly as features of the office design.

The interaction between the environment and the work is much more profound than one might imagine. The environment is the physical setting which expresses the possibility of work, and which governs the minutiae of work. To work effectively, in your own style, and in your own most efficient way, you must be free to arrange the environment so that it supports this work. That means, you have to fine tune and tailor the environment so that it supports exactly your work patterns, not someone else's -- and so that it is uniquely, and efficiently supporting every tiny move you make, every subtle way in which you sit and talk with people, the conditions in which you arrange your working materials, the conditions which allow the people who work under you to be themselves, and to work effectively together.

Yet, we have been living through a period when working conditions are, from an emotional standpoint, at an all-time low. Physical working conditions are good. Health plans are good. Retirement, for some, is good. In some companies, incentive-programs are good. But do people love the places where they work. Do they love their work. Is it as pleasant to be at work, as it is to be at home. Unfortunately not. In most cases the work-place is unpleasant and destructive emotionally. A sea of office furniture. An impersonal place. A place where employees wait for 5 o'clock.

In the vast majority of cases, offices are physically unpleasant. The work-place alienates the employees, creates an impersonal working atmosphere -- and, more important - - it creates an atmosphere in which people can get any work done.

The main reason is that the 20th century office is entirely impersonal. People have trouble getting any work done, because the work-place is governed and controlled by images of what a company "ought to look like", not by practical visions of a comfortable work environment in which people really can work with pleasure, as hard as they want to, and as effectively as they want to.

The companies that succeed in the 1990's and in the early decades of the 21st century, will be those companies which create conditions where work is stimulating, challenging,

rewarding -- and above all, where the good people control their own work.

My colleagues and I spent some time visiting the headquarters of ComputerLand in Oakland, California. The division that works best from a human management point of view is the accounting division. Environmentally it is a total shambles. There's a bunch of old furniture with paper piled all over it. People arranged in odd little groups, plowing away, doing their work. It was their best workgroup, but the people who took me around ComputerLand were actually apologizing. They almost didn't want us to go in there. While we were there they kept saying, "Please don't think this is our environment. We haven't changed this yet, but we've changed almost everything else, and we'll be changing this soon."

Then the head of facilities management took us to see the usual sea of empty cubicles with panels and workstations, silent as the grave, perfectly manicured, ugly orange, brown, and grey, not a human voice to be heard. Yet this is what the company aspired to.

The accounting division, which really worked from a human standpoint, and which was pleasant to be in, because it was real life there, was embarrassing to them.

This embarrassment factor, which has been created in large part by architects and the media, and by the in-house culture of the corporate industry, makes it difficult for people to face reality about the problem. As soon as they see things that really work, it turns them off.

3. A NEW VISION

EXAMPLE OF THE KINDS OF THINGS THAT WORKPLACE DESIGN WOULD INCLUDE. IDEALLY THIS WOULD BE THE BULK OF THE TWO PAGES. ie. WHAT DOES A "COMFORTABLE WORK ENVIRONMENT" MEAN?

Creative employers are going to realize that they must make a better work environment, simply in order to keep their best employees, and to stimulate their employees to better work. This will require an approach to the environment which allows each person, and each group, to achieve a genuine emotional comfort...a new kind of environment in which the well being at the office is as great as the well being at home... an atmosphere is personal freedom, in which groups are encouraged to make their own environment as productive as possible, and in which the joy of work, and the unique character of

individual people, and individual groups, is recognized, established and supported.

This is an entirely new vision of the office.

I believe that this new vision will be heralded by a new vision of the physical work-place, not only by new styles of management. A new kind of physical furniture and furnishing, which encourages individual expression and individual patterns of work, and a style of management which respects the workers, and which encourages the formation of unique domains, in which people can be themselves, and in which individual people, and groups of people, are able to put out their best efforts, have fun, and do a tremendous amount of work.

* First of all the light: the light has the sparkle of natural light, it is soft, bright, has life to it. This is achieved by the way the light moves and is reflected on surfaces.

* Second, the hand tailored feeling of the space. The space is unique to the individual who uses it.

* Third, color. The personal quality of color exists in the space. It is not decorator color, but a color which arises from the individual's personality. It is soft and harmonious, but unique to the individual.

* Fourth, actual comfort of chairs and tables and desks. They have an ordinary old fashioned kind of comfort. You feel related to them. They are not Old fashioned, but have a feeling which relates them to the human body so that they evoke the same kinds of feelings as we sometimes feel in a very old place.

* Fifth finishes. Some lacquer finish, some very ordinary painted wood, natural wood and stained wood. The whole thing is at the same time elegant and no-nonsense. It is easy to use. The kind of place you feel fine leaving your coffee on the desk. The quality, on a subtle level, communicates that you can leave it messy, that it is really a place to work, not a place to "clean up". This is achieved partly because it is so elegant that it allows all kinds of clutter and mess to coexist. It is also achieved by the subtle feeling, which invites human comfort.

* Sixth, the variety. One experiences each office as subtly human and belonging to an actual person, because it is tinged with personality, and on a practical level, it is not the same as anyone else's office. It is more like walking into someone's house than into today's mass produced office cubicle.

* Seventh, variety of actual use patterns. There are several kinds of chairs, several kinds of tables, several kinds of

shelves. On this literal level, it provides a more rich and filled kind of practical and functional variety.

* Eighth, high practical quality. It contains a number of features we think of as in the "Mercedes" class: a small pull out light table that comes out from your work-surface if you need it, a kind of table that really allows clutter bottles, phone books etc to be comfortably left loose, a place where many piles of paper can be put in a small volume and easy to find.

* Ninth, a softness and elegance of textiles. Silks, corduroy velvet, instead of the harsh machine-cloth typical of today's panels.

* Tenth, and last, the whole thing is both elegant and completely relaxed. It houses the shirtsleeve atmosphere and the formal atmosphere equally well. As a result, the image quality is totally gone. You are comfortable with coffee cups on the floor, file-boxes lying around, papers piled on desks and other surfaces, as when it is clean. It is the real place where you work, and where you are comfortable working, not the image place which "looks like" work. This is its most important attribute. No more "taking the real work somewhere else", because this is the place where you want to work, and the place where you feel comfortable doing it.

At the larger level of the office as an organization, we feel the same kind of comfort. Offices are related to one another like rooms, chains of rooms, project teams have their own space, there is an elegant and simple comfort in the movement from space to space, which is entirely different from the rat-maze quality of today's endless cubicles. This planning is achieved by a new kind of layout process, and new planning tools, which allow the layout to come directly from the people who manage and use the office space. It is very easy and very convenient.

The arms-length relation between the architecture and design community, and facilities manager, who create something into which people are then funneled like eggs into a carton, disappears completely. New kinds of processes make it impossible any longer to regard an office as a showroom for a designer's interesting ideas, or as the logo of some furniture company. The work-space is the product of the people who work, and it serves them perfectly.

4. IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE

THIS DREAM IS RESISTED NOW, NOT BECAUSE
PEOPLE DON'T AGREE WITH IT. IN FACT THEY

COVET IT. BUT THEY FEEL IT'S NOT POSSIBLE

So far the big companies have almost entirely failed to produce this atmosphere. Steelcase, Haworth, Knoll, Sunar Hauserman, Westinghouse, even Herman Miller, have all been making the same furniture -- a style of environment in which people remain as cogs in the tidy company machine, victims of the company image, and not human persons in an effective and likeable environment.

Obviously, this has not happened because of any plot to create a bad environment. All these companies have been doing their best to make the environment better.

But the management problems of creating a humane environment are enormous. It is administratively difficult to make a workplace pleasant, because the technical problem of managing desks, walls, equipment, inventory, moving, etc, have become a big and difficult problem in themselves.

As a result, companies have resorted to a "techno-process", in which desks, partitions and equipment are moved and placed by an essentially mechanical procedure. To try and make it look better, "image" (good design and so forth) is glued on top. But this doesn't change the fundamental alienation which exists in the environment. It only creates the outward impression of something better.

Art Kleiner: Asking for a more complete vision: What sorts of things are involved in allowing groups and individuals to have an environment they want?

There are two different issues. One is that if you get an environment in which groups and individuals have more of this genuine adaptation to their own local and peculiar needs, it's a colossal management problem. Forget to look at the facilities manager as a bad guy, but try to imagine what it's like to be that person. You're attempting to organize hundreds of different workstations. You have an inventory in a warehouse with a bunch of desks and panels. When people need workstations you ship out a desk and a couple of panels and hope that that's it. It's too complicated to do anything else.

This is the core of the problem. It's not only that the system has to have the capacity to allow the user to figure things out for themselves, but it's essentially got to solve this hardware management problem.

Then suppose that you have a workgroup of ten people. You have the idea that they're going to design their own space. Try to visualize the human difficulty. They're all going to say different things. You try to get them to cooperate. You're pushing and pulling. From the facilities manager's point of view, you've got to hire a full-time architect to hold their hands and get an answer to the problem of how they

all want to work together. It's very difficult.

So the layout process, which smoothly allows people to define their own workspace without all that hassle, and which solves the group interaction problem, is the crux of the whole thing.

The simple fact is that the layout of an office environment cannot be seen as a technical problems to be solved by designers and facilities managers alone. That just cannot be made to work, because it creates, INEVITABLY, just that environment which people do not like.

What is required is a new kind of process, in which the needs of individuals, as a personal and individual matter, and the needs of groups, as a personal group matter, plays the fundamental role in shaping he environment.

5. A NEW PROCESS

WHAT IF IT WERE POSSIBLE. WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO PUT IT IN PLACE. WHAT WOULD THE PROCESS OF FURNITURE PROCUREMENT HAVE TO BECOME, AGAIN BRIEFLY.

Coupled with the new system of furniture, we shall see a new layout process, in which people will be able to lay out their own space for themselves ... individuals will be able to lay out their own workstations for themselves, so that they are genuinely comfortable. Groups, and departments will be able to lay out their own overall departmental space for themselves.

The first key will be that this process, which is impossible to imagine to day, because it is simply too difficult from an administrative point of view -- will be quick, comfortable and easy.

And, the second key: there will be a system of furniture which back s it up, and which supports it and makes it simple.

These two key facts together will make it something which facilities managers, department managers, and designers, all together will embrace, because it is beautiful, and easy to do -- and because it produces better human results.

Designers and facilities managers will be able to "let" this

happen, or to "make " this happen, because of new tools, never available before, which are specifically designed to make this happen.

THE LAYOUT PROCESS SYSTEM TO ACCOMPANY THE LAYOUT PROCESS

During the next decade we shall see an entirely new kind of work environment, which is made to cater to real individual need, not to image -- and which provides, as part of its mode of functioning, a way, and process, by which managers, facilities managers, and department managers, can actually allow their employees to get the environment they want, without a great deal of effort or trouble in the physical plant.

To some degree the present alienating and terrible environment which exists, exists because the management problem of laying out furniture in a large corporate office is enormous,. There are problems of inventory, flexibility rotation of personnel, which make it extremely difficult to manage the environment well, and tends to reward those facilities managers who take a mechanical and impersonal approach to the office payout problem.

The new systems of furniture will be based, most fundamentally, on ways of managing office space, that allow individuals and groups to have the environment they want, without putting a burden on the company, or on the facilities manager.

Within this new environment, the facilities manager will become the friend of the employees, because it will be possible for him (her) to provide just what the working staff want. It will be his function to provide a flexible and adapted space, in which each part is unique, yet in which groups work as wholes, and in which the feeling of belonging to the company, is increased, not reduced, by the great creative liberty which allows each person to get his and her own working needs completely solved.

Thus the new office environment will arise as a result of cooperation between office managers who see it in their interest to provide something that makes people happy and effective, and a system of furniture and environment which is able to provide just what each individual person wants.

In this world, I believe the work-place will be as friendly and effectively as your home. The efficiency of American workers will increase, absenteeism will go down. Length of stay in a company will increase. Responsible and effective contributions to the life of the company will increase.

6. PRECEDENTS

ARE THERE PRECEDENTS THAT SHOW THAT IT IS POSSIBLE.

Yes!

Haven't had time to describe them yet.

Include Japanese computerized system of house layout, coupled with high speed high precision manufacturing.

Include

7. CONCLUSIONS.

IF IT IS POSSIBLE, WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE.

The new environment will come about as a direct result of a changed understanding, in which the contribution of people, and the uniqueness of people, and the uniqueness of different work-groups, is explicitly recognized, and made real, by the fact that it is the fundamental process of office layout and office creation that is changed.

That is the revolution which is coming. That the people who work in an environment will be, essentially, the people who create that environment, and that when we go into any office we shall be seeing the character and product of their lives, as working people, and we shall see the character of environment which makes them comfortable, and effective. It is their life. The emphasis will be on the life, not on the image.

To control their own work, to be effective, people will have to control their own work PLACE. Each person has a unique style of work. When allowed to develop this unique style of work, people become effective, productive, creative. If forced to work in the mould set by someone else, it is very hard indeed to do your best work.

So -- quite simply -- doing your best work depends on having a work-place which is arranged and organized by YOU in the way that suits you, complements you, and allows your own unique style of work to succeed..

For self-employed people this is obvious. If you visit an entrepreneur, or any self employed person, you are always

struck by the fact that the environment -- the way the work is done -- is always unique, either to that person, or to that group of people.

In the future we shall see this as the main theme and main character, in the work environment of American business.