

Meaningful places (column in CfPB-nieuwsbrief van juni 2008)

In this column international workplace expert John Worthington reflects on new ways of working that have emerged and on the consequences for the corporate office.

When recently visiting the Center at Delft I was rightfully reminded of its correct title when I referred to it as the Center for Buildings and People. As somebody trained as an architect it is easy to be focused on the imagined primacy of built form at the expense of people. However, the places we enjoy are given meaning and vitality by the organizations and individuals that possess them. Spaces may be designed by architects but they are brought alive by people.

With the freedom that information and communications technology has afforded us in when, where and how we work (1), “New ways of working” have emerged that have discarded the dominance of the personal workplace for a range of settings that reflect the need for both reflective and collaborative spaces, with a variable time of use, both within and outside the corporate office. The city becomes the office and the office, with its neighborhoods, streets, plazas, club areas and play spaces take on the characteristics of a city (1). New communications technology whilst freeing up the opportunity for work to be undertaken remotely, has also increased the attraction to come together to communicate face to face, build trusting relationships, and exchange ideas. Professor Bill Mitchell, now head the MIT Media Lab, succinctly describes the paradox when he writes “we will gravitate to settings that offer particular cultural, scenic and climatic attractions.... Sometimes we will network to avoid going places, but sometimes still we will go places to network”.

The Corporate office and its location take on a new significance. The office today is more than a clerical factory to which a docile workforce streams in and out of on a regular 9-5 regime. In a knowledge based economy, value is primarily added by increasing the speed of product innovation and in the creativity of design and organization. Place both in the character of the urban location and the settings within the building takes on a new significance. Good staff is harder to attract and retain by merely providing “functional” floor space. Organizations are looking for buildings within which they can express their values in localities that have a distinctive character and diversity of amenities. Places we enjoy tend to be “loose fit”, not precisely designed around one function, with the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, whilst having a dominant role or culture (2). Their success is more than functionality. DEGW in our work on measuring productivity and performance have identified three interlocking measures:

- Efficiency; making the most of the space available, so driving down costs by achieving more with less. The easiest to measure.
- Effectiveness; making the most out of people, by adding value through imagination and supporting creativity. More valuable to measure.
- Expression; making the most of the intrinsic value of the brand, through the messages the environment conveys and the knowledge transmitted. The hardest but most valuable to measure.

The diversity of settings, their location and the messages they express are recognized as an important element in supporting organizational success. Settings, in their turn, need to be thoughtfully designed and managed. They reflect past memories and future aspirations. They should be stimulating whilst also allowing the “space” for individual expression.

The work of the CfPB has made a significant contribution to helping organizations understand better what their organizations are aiming to achieve and then specify the appropriate portfolio of settings. Understanding the intangible asset of expression through design is perhaps one of the next critical challenges to be addressed, as the CfPB looks ahead to charting a program for the future.

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Footnotes:

- 1) John Worthington (Editor) **Reinventing the Workplace**; second edition Architectural Press Oxford 2006
- 2) M. Hajer & A. Reijndorp **In Search of New Public Domain: Analysis and Strategy**, NAI Publishers Rotterdam 2004