

Funky offices: Reflections on office design in the 'new economy'

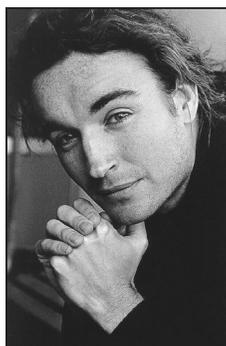
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses office design in the 'new economy'. Office buildings of dot.com companies seem to be dominated by colourful

materials, luxurious facilities such as gyms or lounge areas and gimmicks such as jukeboxes and pool tables. Employees 'float' around in these offices wherever and whenever they want. Such work environments seem very attractive and productive. Still, the meaning and relevance of such 'fun offices' can be questioned. In this paper the authors try to explain where this informal and casual office style comes from, relating it to labour market developments and changes in organisational culture. Secondly, they discuss the merits of 'fun' office design. How does it affect people's creativity, their ideas about work and the distinction between work and private life?

Keywords: workplace innovation, 'new economy', trends in office design, flexible working, fun offices, reflection

INTRODUCTION

At the start of the 1990s it was predicted that virtual workplaces would replace brick-and-mortar office buildings. Designers and consultants questioned the *raison d'être* of office buildings in an era of cyberspace and virtual reality. Large floors filled with rows of grey desks were to become a relic of the past. Today it is clear that office buildings still dominate

our lives and cities. Despite the many revolutionary ideas about virtual corporations, most office employees still spend their working time in office buildings. And this is not likely to change in the near future; for better or worse, the office is here to stay. This observation does not mean that conventional office design should not be questioned. New ways of working, new generations of employees and new lifestyles will put new demands on office design. This becomes clear when taking a look at the accommodation demands of new companies in the multimedia and high-tech sector.

Young, progressive organisations seem to prefer old warehouses and refurbished industrial buildings rather than conventional glass-and-steel skyscrapers. Inside these offices are found 'fun' amenities such as pool tables and coffee bars. It all seems very attractive; work is transformed into play and offices become playgrounds. But how realistic is this? Is it yet another hype, driven by fashion and management fads? Or is there a fundamental change in the way people think about work and the work environment? This paper tries to find an answer; it tries to get to the core of 'funky' workplace design. What is the sense and nonsense of a pool table in the office?

OFFICES ARE HERE TO STAY

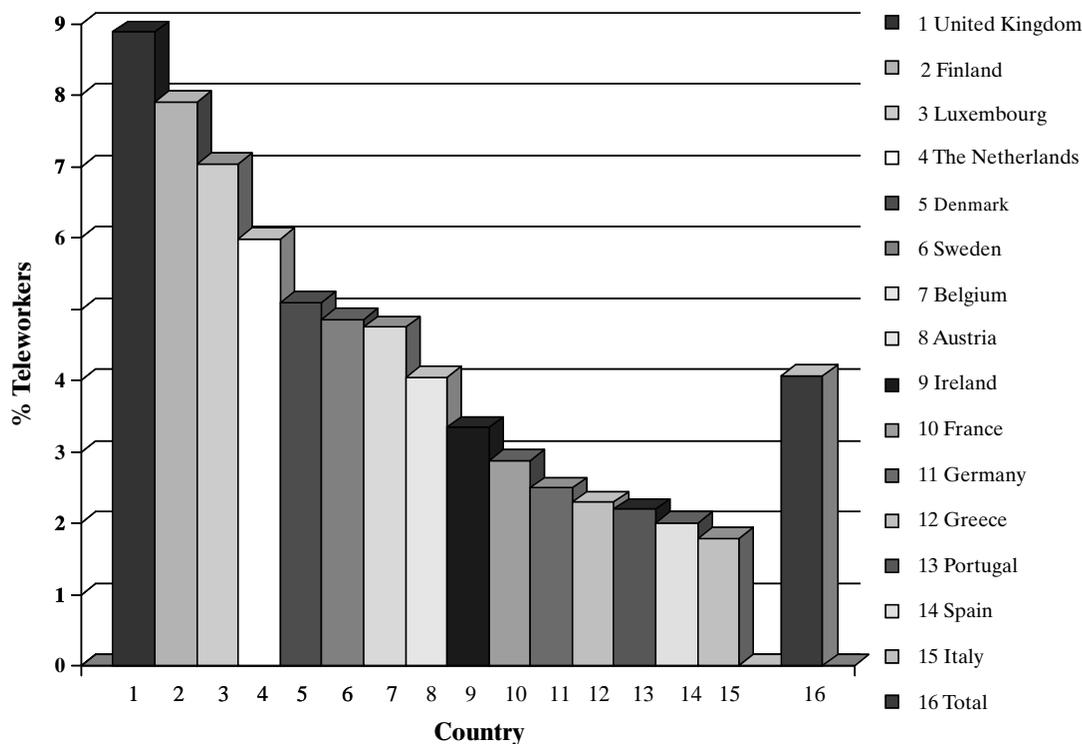
American futurologist Alvin Toffler predicted in the early 1980s that information and communication technologies would revolutionise our lives. In his book 'The Third Wave' he stated that by now people would be working and living in the countryside, connected by computer network.² He foresaw a post-industrial society in which living, working and recreation would be combined in a single space: the electronic cottage. Working from home was (and still is) hailed as the

future of work, as a solution to transport problems and environmental problems; and as a form of work which would reduce stress in the working population. Within our lifetime urban downtowns would 'stand empty, reduced to use as ghostly warehouses or converted into living space'.

When looking at today's cities it is clear that Toffler's predictions were not completely correct. Parking problems and rising rent levels indicate that inner cities are probably more lively than ever, and the majority of the working population still works in office buildings. On the other hand, it is also clear that telework has become a perfectly viable option. New technologies that facilitate telework, such as mobile phones and the Internet, have been 'domesticated' rapidly. Some say that the importance of such technologies is overrated — given the recent downfall of the NASDAQ index and the many bankruptcies in the high-tech sector. Nevertheless, they are ubiquitous; they influence the way people communicate, work and live, and they will continue to do so. Both governments and private companies are stimulating the digitalisation of society. In the Netherlands, for example, the Dutch city of Eindhoven is developing a high-tech residential area, which is referred to as 'e-city'. The 'e-city' project encompasses nearly 38,000 households. Each of them is equipped with high-standard ICT infrastructure such as satellite connections and glass-fibre cabling. Basically they are urban variants of Toffler's electronic cottages.

Despite the increasing digitalisation of society, it is still questionable what its impact will be. Does the fact that people can work at home also mean that they will and want to work at home? Are average citizens going to use their glass-fibre cable to connect with their

Figure 1
Teleworkers in the
European Union
and its component
countries (wages
percentages; paid
employment only)



Source: European Foundation — Merllié & Paoli (2001); data compiled by TNO Arbeid

employers' server, or are they primarily going to download movies, games and mp3s? For the time being, nothing revolutionary has happened. Most work is still done at the office. Telework has become a well-known alternative, but the number of teleworkers is still modest — despite the many success stories in the media. In both Europe and the USA, the percentage of teleworkers rises only steadily. Recent figures from the European Foundation (see Figure 1) indicate that about 4.1 per cent of the European working population can be regarded as teleworkers.³

Obviously, such figures are highly dependent on the definitions used; these figures relate to the number of employees

who telework for at least one-fourth of their working time. Some of the protagonists of teleworking think that such definitions are too narrow. They argue that anybody who occasionally works at home, eg checking mail on a Saturday morning, can be regarded as a teleworker. But whatever definition is being used, it is clear that the steady rise of teleworking has not yet had any quantitative impact on the demand for office space; on the contrary, the office market has been 'booming' these last few years. It is only recently that market analysts have warned that the office market might be past its peak. These warnings, however, have more to do with a possible economic slowdown than with teleworking.

NEW OFFICES FOR THE NEW ECONOMY?

Office buildings are not likely to disappear in the near future, but they certainly will change in character. Office buildings are the materialisation of norms and values about issues such as hierarchy, interaction and privacy. They reflect ideas about the meaning of work and opinions about how work should be performed. As these ideas change over time, so does the office. In that sense the office building is a product of the spirit of the age. Corporations have always spent a lot of money on real estate, and they will continue to do so. The difference is that they will be spending it on other things, depending on what the decision makers value as important. Today a company like Microsoft might still build a huge impressive headquarters, but if it built a headquarters like J. P. Morgan's the result would be regarded as an example of bad taste, or even an affront to modern values.⁴ The J. P. Morgans of today are no longer spending their money on stone-faced, opulent office blocks with marble veneer lobbies and rosewood boardrooms. Instead, they invest it in offices with 'identity', offices that are transparent, open and playful.

At the core of today's changes in office design lies the idea that offices should no longer look like offices. Anonymous or pompous office blocks located in lifeless business parks are losing ground. Young, progressive organisations seem to prefer buildings that were originally designed and constructed for non-office purposes. Old residences and warehouses in downtown areas are increasingly popular. In the USA, buildings from the 1920s and 1930s that were passed over in the 1960s are now considered as prime real estate.⁵ Web-oriented businesses have tied up nearly all the available loft space in Chicago's Loop and in New York's 'Silicon Alley'.⁶

In San Francisco there are even complaints that dot.com companies are propelling rent levels, pushing existing residents away in the older, now fashionable neighbourhoods. In Europe, the market shows a similar tendency. Companies in the multimedia and consulting sector choose 'characteristic', over-sized buildings in the historical centre of cities such as Amsterdam and London — despite the fact that the small, medieval streets are clogged with cars and that there is a chronic shortage of parking space. Dutch architect Kees Christiaanse says: 'a converted 16th century warehouse is the perfect accommodation for a communications consultancy. So perfect that a new building designed in accordance with a carefully prepared building programme would never have achieved a comparable character and quality.'⁷

Organisations that build new office buildings may choose non-office typologies such as campuses. A classic example is the Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, which resembles a university complex rather than an office. The buildings are elegantly located between the pine trees. The typology derives from the fact that the early employees came straight from university, so it was decided that the new office would be designed like a campus to make employees feel at home. The non-office design matches the casual dress code (jeans, khakis, open-necked shirts and sneakers prevail) and the informal interaction between employees. But, despite its interesting building typology, the Microsoft headquarters is not really innovative in its workplace design. Just as in the rest of corporate America, large floor plates are filled with endless rows of cubicles.

To find interesting office interiors, one must look at smaller and more 'hip' companies in the high-tech sector. A

quick glance at ‘new economy’ magazines such as *Wired* suggests that their offices are equipped with kindergarten-like ‘romp spaces’, coffee bars, gyms, day-care centres, pool tables and dartboards. Playfulness and pleasure-seeking are everywhere. In contrast to the seriousness of conventional space planning, with its emphasis on efficiency and flexibility, these interiors stress irony and amusement.

Such offices have to stimulate, titillate and entertain their users. A good example of such ‘funky’ design is the new headquarters of Electronic Arts in Redwood, California — a \$1.2bn interactive entertainment software company. The campus-like headquarters upholds Electronic Arts’ ‘homing from work’ concept. This philosophy allows staff to order their shopping, pick up provisions from the campus general store, eat in the 140-seat restaurant, use the library, exercise in the gym, play five-a-side football and socialise in the sports bar. On Friday evenings in the summer, the company plans to host barbecues on the campus as the sun sets.⁸ A smaller but even more radical example of a ‘fun office’ is the building of KesselsKramer, a Dutch advertising agency. The company inhabits a former church in Amsterdam. Within the building one can find, among other things, a two-thirds scale replica of a wooden Russian fort, an oversized *Baywatch* lookout tower and an AstroTurf floor. Interestingly, the building also houses a bust of Lenin — liberating the office workers from a dull and grey working environment.

BACKGROUND

The observed changes in design are extremely interesting; the problem is that they are hard to judge. How far does their relevance go? Are they superficial changes or do they represent a fundamen-

tal shift in ideas and values about work and workplaces? To get a better understanding it is necessary to find out where these changes come from. What changes are taking place in the wider context of organisations and society? Based on research and literature study, the authors can roughly identify four different (interrelated) explanations: changes in organisational culture and identity; the labour market; ideas about the meaning of work; and increasing relevance of face-to-face communication in a virtual world. Each will be discussed below.

Culture and image

Compared to previous decades, it is quite obvious that organisational cultures do get more informal, flexible and free and less hierarchic. Office buildings reflect these changes.

Just like the remains of buildings of past civilisations, office buildings are ‘artefacts’. Their layout and architecture tell something about the social structure and social relationships of their inhabitants. Deal and Kennedy state in their book ‘Corporate Cultures’: ‘a company’s investment in bricks and mortar inevitably says something about its culture’.⁹

Since the 1950s, corporate culture has been expressed in glass, steel and concrete. High-rise office blocks with shiny façades, fast elevators and air-conditioning became the stereotypical expression of business life. From the outside, they were designed to impress clients and passers-by: the soaring tower, the marble lobby, the sparkling fountains and so on. From the inside, the buildings stressed the need for flexibility and functionality. Such buildings were the products of an economic system that put great faith in the progress of industry, technology and economic growth. Architectural critic Charles Jencks said in an interview that for the ‘captains of industry’ the slender glass tower was the

image of efficiency, of ultimate perfection. It was the metaphor of 'control, control and control'. Modernistic architecture was a 'progressive' style, appealing to a business elite that regards itself as a frontrunner of technological innovation and economic growth.

Today, progressive organisations seem to be looking for something new. They want to deviate from the 'old economy', 'boring' gigantic multinationals which have dominated the economy for so many decades. They want to show that they are different. American journalist David Brooks maintains that today 'the dirtiest word in the corporate lexicon' is *mainstream*. He says: 'every company in America seems to be an evangelical enterprise rocking the establishment'. The key is to be youthful, daring and avant-garde, to personify change. Today's business leaders want to show they are playful free spirits, and office design is one of the means to do this. Think of the image of trend-setting entrepreneurs such as Steve Jobs, Richard Branson or Stelios. Just as their dress-down, casual and rebellious image is becoming more acceptable, almost normal, a more domestic, employee-oriented approach to office design is gaining credence.

In 1950s *Business Week* profiles, executives would be sitting in impressive mahogany and brass offices, wanting to show how much they embodied Benjamin Franklin's virtues: industriousness, thrift, reliability. Now, the predominant visual prop is the 'wacky accoutrement'. The popular, successful managers of today display a snowboard that is hanging from the ceiling next to an ominously broken piece of bungee cord.

Part of this change in identity is the idea that corporations (and their managers) are not focusing only on profits, but also on their role in society. A good example is the headquarters of the Commerzbank in

Frankfurt, designed by Norman Foster. It is the tallest office building in Europe, and in that sense still a classic symbol of corporate fallocracy. But in many ways it is also a progressive building. The building can be referred to as an ecological high-rise, unique of its kind. The Commerzbank invested in natural ventilation, sky gardens and a huge atrium to provide all employees with fresh air, openable windows and an outside view. The building has to show that the bank 'cares' for the environment and the well-being of its employees. As a 'gift' to the local citizens and politicians, the building also has an accessible plaza with an indoor cafe — a contrast with the usual high-security entrances, which can only be entered by those who have the appropriate company keycard.

Other companies have departed from the high-rise concept and build their offices like small 'villages'. Social contacts and human scale are the lead in the design. Large complexes are divided into separate houses that are united by streets and squares. The message is that the large corporation is not just a moneymaking machine, but also a community which cares for its members. The headquarters of Nortel, a Canadian telecoms company, decided to move from its central, high-rise premises in Toronto to a converted factory in the suburbs; it won over reluctant employees by turning its new base into a self-contained town. It has streets, cafes, restaurants, indoor parks, even a Zen garden. In such cases the ambition is to create no longer just a workplace, but also a meeting place and a homeport. Other corporations, like the Dutch consultancy group Twynstra and the software giant Oracle, have offices with a kitchen. Young professionals do not go home for supper, but stay at the office and 'enjoy' a meal with their colleagues. Furthermore, they no longer play sports at their local

soccer club, but instead frequent the corporate gym, as they do in the new IBM headquarters. After all, it is in the companies' best interest to have healthy employees (and it might save them from lawsuits for new workplace-related diseases, such as repetitive strain injury and burnout). Just as important, such amenities can be used to show that the corporation is 'online' with the needs and desires of the scarce young professional.

Labour market

The 'softening' (or 'Disneyfication') of the work environment is partly driven by the desire to attract and retain staff. In a labour-short economy, companies seem to be desperate to please employees, or at least those that are in short supply, such as IT specialists. Companies want to show they understand the needs of young *high potentials*. A well-designed workplace may play an important role in this effort. For years, workplace consultants and designers have stated that workplace design can be used to attract the best and the brightest. The problem is that the physical work environment is hardly a factor in attracting and retaining staff. Research shows that employees are still more interested in a salary rise or new technological gadgets than in workplace design (see Table 1). Design can, however, play an important symbolic role. As mentioned before, office buildings convey a certain image to people and, as is known from psychological research, first impressions are crucial.

Another labour market issue is that new generations of workers may have different needs from the previous generations of employees. According to John Worthington¹⁰ new generations of employees are educated, professional, self-managing, independent and increasingly mobile, moving upwards from job to job with little concern for the old security of the 'job for life'. If a company

Table 1: Importance of organisation characteristics — named by workers of a Dutch Internet company

Characteristic	Named by %
Job satisfaction	20.0
Self-expression	18.4
Type of work	18.3
Salary	17.6
Autonomy	16.6
Corporate culture	16.3
Valuation	14.4
Work sphere	12.3
Career perspective	11.9
Participation	10.1
Fringe benefits	8.3
Location	7.3
Layout	1.2
Image (office)	0.0

Source: Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture, Real Estate & Project Management, Froukje Smulders and Saskia Teurlings, 2001

wants to attract such people, it should probably also invest in workplaces that match their lifestyle. This is one of the reasons why, for example, in the Netherlands the government has decided to give every civil servant, in principle, the possibility of teleworking. In the current labour market, employees simply have more power to get what they want. This does not mean that they will have detailed demands about the actual design of their workplace, but they will demand greater freedom and flexibility in choosing when and where to work. The division between work and family life is an especially important issue. Charles Romeo, the director of employee benefits at ConAgra, puts it well: 'When we make our employees choose between work and family, we lose every time.' In the modern society organisations must be mindful of ways to help employees fulfil their family obligations. Family-friendly

employers make a tremendous contribution in the struggle to make allies of work and family. Family-supportive organisations with flexible working arrangements and matching innovative office space create greater employee commitment and career satisfaction.¹¹

Another issue is that employees have jobs which earlier did not exist (at least in a formal sense). David Brooks¹² writes: ‘the information age has produced entirely new job categories, some of which seem like practical jokes, though you wouldn’t know it from their salaries: creativity officer, chief knowledge officer, team spirit co-ordinator, web page designer, and so on.’ These are new jobs, with new workstyles and probably new workplace demands. This seems to be particularly true in the Internet sector. Russel¹³ says about Internet companies:

‘They are heavy on graphic designers, interface designers, and animators, people whose education may be art school, whose lifestyle is urban, who draw inspiration from arts and culture, and who socialise in downtown night-clubs rather than suburban golf clubs. They tend to prefer urban loft environments to the carpeted, mirror glass confines of business parks.’

Their idea about the meaning of work seems to be different from that of earlier generations of office workers.

The meaning of work

In the 1970s and 1980s it was predicted that the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) would result in more leisure and less work. This idea did not turn into reality. Some work processes, especially routine jobs, have indeed disappeared: ATMs, for example, are slowly replacing bank clerks. In general, however, ICT has not freed

society from the need to work. As a matter of fact, people spend more rather than less time on labour. Despite the emergence of new phenomena such as sabbaticals and part-time work, people work more hours a week than they did 25 years ago. They check their e-mail at weekends and take their mobile phones on holiday (and, deep down inside, are disappointed when they are not called — say needed — by the company).

Clearly, mobile technology and improved network connections have facilitated the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. Mobile equipment gives employees the chance to work at places outside the office, and they tend to use that opportunity. According to British research, for instance, employees equipped with laptops work harder and perceive themselves as more productive than their PC counterparts. Working overtime is so common that it is no longer regarded as overtime; it comes with the job. This development, however, is not only technology-driven. It is also related to changing ideas about the value and meaning of work. For decades, family and church were the social heart of people’s lives. Now the corporation seems to have taken over, at least for those twenty-something knowledge workers that want to make a career. At the start of the century most people still worked in factories. Work was a means to earn money and little more. Now, young professionals tend to regard work also as a form of self-expression. They want not only a fancy leased car, a WAP phone and stock options, but also a job that is ‘fun’ and interesting. As with so many other trends, Silicon Valley led the way. It was the Californian start-up companies that came up with the idea that the workplace should be a fun place, especially when spending 80-plus hours a week in the office.

For example, when the Internet caught on in the mid-1990s, Netscape employees were said to be playing roller hockey in car park and bringing their dogs to work — evidence of how the company championed the anarchy and freedom of expression of the Web. This is a radical example (and probably no longer true since Netscape was bought by America Online), but it is symptomatic. The protestant work ethic has been replaced by the postmodern idea that work should be an ‘extended hobby’, an expression of who one is: I work, so I am.

But not only employees are interested in ‘labourtainment’. Corporations realise they need to offer something more than just a salary in return for the high-pressure atmosphere and long hours. And, just as important, a ‘fun’ work environment might stimulate productivity. According to management gurus such as Jeremy Rifkin and John Kao, ‘fun’ is crucial for corporate survival. Rifkin states: ‘In the new era, industrious gives way to creative, and business becomes less defined in terms of work and more in terms of play’.¹⁴ In other words: while the traditional pursuit of new capital, raw materials and more efficient technologies continues, the competitive advantage belongs to businesses that recognise the value of imagination, inspiration, ingenuity and initiative. Interestingly enough, office design is regarded as one of the tools to achieve this. In his book ‘The Art and Management of Creativity’ Kao explicitly mentions office design as one of the main instruments to create a creative work environment.¹⁵ According to Kao, companies should rethink their concept of space. They should ‘shake it up, break it down and stretch it out’ and create spaces ‘whose walls subtly establish an even more psychic freedom’. One of the central ideas is also to create open spaces, to achieve ‘lightning fast communications’.

Employees should be provided with ‘humour rooms’, ‘meditation rooms’ and the like, to create a ‘playground image’ in which work and play are combined.

And apparently such office buildings work. Chairman Lee Clow of the American advertising agency Chiat/Day said to the *Wall Street Journal*:

‘It’s a rare weekend in this agency when you won’t find people at work . . . Sometimes I am asked what I say to people to get them to work on Saturday and Sunday. We don’t say anything. But our creative people know what we expect from them. They know they will have a chance in this big sandbox. It’s designed to be a stimulating place, a fun place, an interactive place, a social place.’

So, it seems that employees spend more time at the office when they regard their work and their workplace as ‘fun’. It should seriously be questioned, however, whether it is really healthy to sacrifice one’s personal life for work.

Physical versus virtual

As said before, new technologies such as the Internet and e-mail do not render office buildings irrelevant. One might be inclined to say that their relevance is probably going to increase. With the growing complexity of business problems and the use of information technology, a rapid growth is to be seen in the use of temporary, multi-disciplinary teams with globally distributed memberships. Already one-third of American companies with 50 or more employees have one-half or more of their employees working in self-managed and problem solving teams. Many of these teams have no traditional boss or supervisor. Instead, team members take on responsibility for planning, scheduling, directing and controlling their

work. Perhaps more importantly, these teams are increasingly linked, via global networks like the Internet, with an instantaneous and unrestricted flow of information within and between teams and team members.

'Eighty per cent of life is just showing up', Woody Allen once said in an interview, when he was expressing an everyday reality for the Industrial Age worker. One has to be there to be seen, and one has to be seen to be trusted. But that model of work is simply no longer appropriate. Showing up no longer has to be a part of the equation. Work is what one does, not where one goes; doing it is what counts.¹⁶ In this context of independence of time and place, it is extremely important for workers to have a common space where they meet colleagues, have small talks with their boss (if they have one) and catch up with all the new gossip. It is not just earning a salary. It is about belonging, about having a stake.

For this reason, office buildings, places where employees meet face-to-face and can actually work together, will be increasingly important. For example, Sapient Corp., an e-business management consulting firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, gives each project team of engineers a room where they work closely for periods as short as 10 or 12 weeks or as long as 18 months. That space belongs to the group members for the duration of the project, and they can use it as frequently as they want and in the way they want. They even can personalise it. For them the physical room, with its walls, door and furniture, is the central meeting point in their increasingly virtual world. Furthermore, it is the place where they meet their clients, and in their case it is therefore almost an obligation to make the place unconventional, as clients come to them for offbeat, creative thinking.¹⁷

According to Franklin Becker, Director of Cornell University's International Workplace Studies Program, there can be a great deal of social isolation for individuals who spend significant time away from the office.¹⁸ Companies have to put in other support structures, like creative office design, just to ensure workers are in the office from time to time to interact with people. At Deloitte Consulting in Pittsburgh, for instance, the company created areas for social interaction and casual meeting places as part of its switch to flexible workspaces. One popular perk is a 'cybercafé', where hurried consultants can munch on free snacks while they plug in their laptops in a relaxed environment. The café offers six kinds of cappuccino, fruit, bagels and candy bars.¹⁹ The company even stopped delivering mail to employees' desks, a move that fosters chance encounters and socialising. Employees who now have to walk to the mailroom to get their mail often get a chance to meet and catch up with co-workers. In the virtual world face-to-face communication seems to be even more important. Office design can play a role in meeting this need.

SENSE OR NONSENSE?

The developments described above are attractive. Work is transformed into play, and workplaces are transformed into playgrounds. It is clear, however, that the companies used as examples in this paper do not represent the average organisation. Most of them are in the Internet, multimedia or design businesses. For such organisations, 'fun' offices are almost a natural option: their employees are young; they are in creative businesses, and in most cases they are relatively successful, meaning that they have sufficient resources to invest in 'extras'. In that sense, they have little in common with

traditional, large, ‘old economy’ corporations.

So, what is the relevance of extraordinary design concepts to the average corporation? Probably, it lies in the idea that ‘fun’ office design will stimulate employee creativity. It is said that the occasional pool table and bean bags do more than brighten up the space; they get the ‘creative juices flowing’. If somebody is having a ‘mind freeze’, they can get up and walk around. Such features are supposed to help employees to express their feelings. And, to a certain extent, this is probably true. According to the ‘behaviour-setting theory’, people respond spontaneously upon recognising certain physical cues in the setting (colours, materials, layout ...). In other words: design informs users about how they should behave. For example, it has been noticed that churches elicit religious behaviour even in people who are not religious. Likewise, moving from the conference table to the easy chairs in the executive suite often produces less formal interaction.²⁰ And in a residential atmosphere workers may feel more relaxed and comfortable than in a grey, sterile work environment.

Nonetheless, the impact of design on behaviour should not be overestimated. First, people easily get used to new environments. It is questionable for how long employees will literally ‘see’ the bright colours and awkward shapes. How long will they be surprised by the idea of having surfboards on the wall? Secondly, and more important, is the fact that the success of creative design depends on the organisational context. Ultimately ‘fun’ and ‘creativity’ are really about spontaneity, and spontaneity is tough to manage. Unlike buildings and interiors, it is not something that can be designed. Therefore, creative office design works only when people want it to.

It is the corporate culture — the employees’ norms and values about work, formality and interaction — which defines the sense or nonsense of basketball courts and chill-out zones. In many cases these norms and values are still quite rigid and traditional. In the Netherlands, for example, corporate culture is deeply rooted in the Protestant work ethic.²¹ Many organisations are wary of investing in ‘fun’ elements that are not closely related to work. To employees, a ‘non-stop party atmosphere’, with its obligatory social events, may be almost as tyrannical as old-economy rules about wearing a tie and calling their boss ‘sir’. Research shows that Dutch employees generally do not engage much in social contacts with their co-workers.²² In that case, the chances are that an office pub or lounge will soon end up as archive space. After all, what is the meaning of a corporate watering hole when only 3.4 per cent of Dutch employees occasionally drink a beer with colleagues after working time?

Just like other radical new office concepts, the ‘fun’ office is probably a perfect solution for *some* corporations — depending on their culture, demographics and work processes. Still, the examples discussed in this paper hold important lessons for office design in general. Even if one does not buy the ‘new economy’ management rhetoric, the discussed examples provide food for thought. What sets them apart from ordinary office buildings is not their efficiency or their flexibility, but their focus on the ‘soft’ side of office design: the desires and needs of employees. Their design may be a bit over the top, but they are a welcome deviation from tedious, mainstream office design. Most mainstream offices still resemble those of a hundred years earlier.

Colours and materials may have changed, but the basic idea is still the same, while organisations and work styles

have altered. A great many books have addressed the issue of the information society, knowledge economy, network economy or, more recently, the new economy. Whatever name is being used, it is clear that life- and work styles are slowly changing because of the emergence of new technologies (just as they have always done).

The problem is that these changes are hard to materialise into design. Even many of the so-called innovative office concepts are still stuck in the 20th century, 'old' economy model. As often seen in history, innovations are still based on the old paradigm: the first aeroplanes looked like a fast car, and the first cars like a horse carriage. Likewise, most offices still look like white-collar factories. Even 'modern' open plans differ little from 19th-century typing pools. Interestingly, the examples discussed in this paper try to provide alternative typologies, such as the office as the playground, the village, the campus, or the medieval warehouse. These metaphors seem a bit naïve, but they try to deal with the notion that, paradoxically, offices are becoming more rather than less important in our 'virtual' lives. Earlier the office used to be a place to work; now the office seems to have a more demanding role, as a place where people practically live, as well as work.

Many of the topics addressed in this paper are still open to question. One of the most basic questions remains whether the informal and casual office style of the 'new economy' will have a lasting impact on the real estate market. Is funky office design just a temporary expression of fashion? Or does it represent a fundamental shift in the way people think about work and workplaces? Will large, 'old economy' businesses (the majority of the market) also adopt fun-features in their work environment? These questions are hard to answer in the light of

the current crisis in the dot.com sector. Even the most 'hip' Internet companies are now 'rationalising' their real estate portfolio, focusing on efficiency rather than employee desires. Cisco, for example, has a huge surplus of space at this moment, which it is trying to lease to other companies. According to American real estate experts, the situation at Cisco is typical. In Silicon Valley, supply exceeds demand for office space and rents are going down. Real estate, an organisation's second largest cost factor, is an attractive area for cost reduction. For that reason it is questionable whether companies will still be willing to invest in 'funky' design (designer furniture, the latest technologies and extras such as a gym or an espresso bar) when facing a financial crisis. Will long-term benefits such as employee satisfaction and creativity survive the short-term focus on costs and efficiency?

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