

Better by Design

Why spend money on improving the office ? Part of the answer is obvious - more space, better systems, smarter public image. But then the argument gets a bit more complicated. In the trade there is a long-standing debate raging, understanding the difference between **efficiency** on the one hand (which is all about improved productivity - learning how to crank the handle more smoothly and ever faster), and **effectiveness** on the other (learning how to crank the handle to better purpose).

Trying to get to the bottom of the effectiveness debate and in particular understanding what effect the working environment has on improving useful endeavour is something that increasingly occupies the minds of managers and consultants in our competitive world. To go through the motions of change without doing anything particularly useful is all too easy. If you are going to go to all the expense, not to mention the trauma of upgrading your office, there is a serious need to understand what you are doing and why.

Various issues make the efficiency / effectiveness debate all the more relevant to managers in the developed world and in Scotland in particular. The move from a manufacturing to a service economy and then into the 'knowledge industries' is well documented. For too long Scotland thought it could compete with other low wage economies only to find that that sort of inward investment quickly disappeared as grants dried up or lower overheads could be exploited elsewhere. The need to make best use of our intellectual capital and add value to goods and services along with the best in Europe, is now clear. With this has come the recognition that ideas, attitudes, creativity, flexibility are all infinitely more valuable than that never ending squeeze on overheads. This difference in values is what we see in the TASCOCO Europe (a division of Shell) headquarters in Glasgow, the new corporate headquarters for Schweppes in Watford or the new ABN Amro offices outside Amsterdam. The significance of what could be achieved by design was even appreciated by Tarmac - a company more familiar with hard hats and donkey jackets than modern design - in their new offices in Bellshill where a radically new character helped to usher in not just new business systems but a whole new business culture.

Thus: new ideas about management and new emphasis on the office as the place where managerial ideas are played out and worker attitudes are formed.

Much goes into making a successful office. Issues range from the crucial need to accommodate technology, to all the worthy details of housekeeping which keep the place running day to day. Downtime on computers, sloppy filing systems, clever use of space in regulating flexibility and efficiency all play a significant part in maintaining that "bottom line". Similarly the need to maintain an equitable physical environment might seem obvious, but deep plan buildings with cheap developer air-conditioning systems lead all too often to complaints of headaches, sore eyes and the symptoms of "sick building syndrome". Desks can be too small or awkwardly proportioned, noise can be distracting, glare can prevent the use of computers and loose cables and clutter can even be a health hazard. The list goes on and all require to be addressed before one can even think about the finer points of design. In the face of it all, talking about creativity or aesthetics can seem either an indulgence or a distraction.

Design at the aesthetic end of the scale can sometimes be misplaced and designers and managers can sometimes lose the plot, but to retreat into practicality is not the solution. Largely because to do so can be to lose sight of that effectiveness side of the management debate. "Man does not live by bread alone....." and to lose track of the fact that we are psychological just as much as physical animals, is to miss out on that which is possibly most critical in the new knowledge age.

To say that the quality of the office determines the way in which knowledge is shared and generated is to go too far, but the form of the office plays an important part. Layout, in spite of the opportunities afforded by electronic communication still largely determines the way in which information is shared. Professor Thomas Allen of MIT's "30 metre rule" whereby two scientists or engineers whose desks are more than 30 metres apart have a communication frequency of almost zero, is still largely the case. The physical arrangements of teams, juxtaposition of departments and access to physical meeting places still plays a critical role in most organisations, and the way in which people continue to gravitate to cities and brave the ordeals of transatlantic flights suggests that the virtual office is more than a little way off. What is undoubtedly the case however is that the emphasis has moved from spaces for information processing to information sharing, where formal and informal meeting points increasingly dominate the office scene - as with Scottish Enterprise's new headquarters in Glasgow or, more ambitiously, British Airways "Waterside" complex near Heathrow.

But this is still being fairly 'practical' and is easily justifiable. Design has not yet made its case in terms of affecting worker attitudes. At this point it is tempting to say that the difference between a sensible but dull office and one which has a psychological effect, is style. We all appreciate a quality environment even though it might be difficult to articulate where quality lies, but a successful working environment would appear to be not just this but to strike at something deeper still. Ironically it might even fly in the face of what the style magazines consider "good design".

A clue to what is good design (or "design which is good for business") possibly lies in the current quest to understand creativity in the office and the closely linked issue of "entrepreneurialism". In each case it is agreed that intelligence (different sorts), access to information, interaction with others all play a part. Clever use of technology and quality of environment play an important role also. However against this, new ideas and new businesses appear to emerge as much from garrets and garages as they do from the modern offices of Microsoft. No-one working out of primitive workspace is likely to endorse poor lighting and lack of comfort, but simple workspace or at least workspace of one's own offers something that the most sophisticated workspace can easily overlook, namely the powerful benefit of being in control of one's own environment. The simple ability to open a window, turn down the heating or decorate one's workplace, can all become critical in maintaining psychological well being especially when these become symbols of one's existence in the organisation as a whole. By the same logic the freedom to express oneself, to alter the office to better suit one's work process can have an effect on those positive attitudes involved in creativity, innovation and risk taking. Thus it is not so much the damp running down the walls, as independence, the ability for the space to be owned, knocked about to suit changing needs and fancies, generally not to become over precious which is appealing about the proverbial garage or warehouse outbuilding, and not just its affordability !

Thus over and above the physical quality of the space and the intellectual attributes of the user, is that which makes people want to do something or feel that they are allowed to do it. "You can take a horse to water" as they say. Stylish design, or design which imposes itself on the user might therefore have exactly the opposite effect of what it intends to. It might be exciting and might impress but it can easily inhibit, either by saying 'don't touch' or being so daunting that it belittles the attempts of the humble user.

Not that dull design is therefore the answer, Dull design for its part can communicate all the negative messages of bureaucracy or the unassailability of privileged management. Somewhere in between there is that which stimulates, is optimistic, invites change and interaction and is fun. The design does not have to be high tech, although these days it will undoubtedly have to have the ability to accommodate technology. It does not have to be in a modern building, but it will certainly have to be flexible. It might not be air-conditioned and open plan, meeting those criteria which seem to set the highest rents in the city centre, but it will need to provide different types of spaces ranging from single offices to conference rooms, to kitchens, to large departments.

An examination of two projects recently undertaken by **haa design** for two very different clients might illustrate these points. The one was for a computer software and design company, the other for an established firm of lawyers. The high-tech design firm was moving into an historic warehouse / factory type building, the lawyers were refurbishing a 15 year old speculative office block. Both organisations would describe themselves as part of the 'knowledge industry' and definitely rely upon the originality of their workforce to maintain their cutting edge.

In the project for Digital Animations Group (DAG) the relationship between organisation and workspace is most obvious, not so much because computer graphic design is more obviously "creative" and likely to be appreciative of visually exciting workspace, but because the different 'modes of work' are more extreme, calling for more obvious contrasts between the different types of work area. The space is divided generally between studio space at ground floor level and break-out / alternative workspace in the basement. The space is definitely stylish and contains various fun elements like a 'light wall' and an amphitheatre scribble wall and an inflatable igloo which make it distinctly different. These, together with the high ceilings, good ventilation and generous daylight all have an impact on people's feeling of well-being and keenness to come to work. What is different from some other stylish offices however is how robust the space is and able to accommodate computers and printers and plastic dinosaurs and pictures of fast cars that clutter the workplace. It is an old building and the rough industrial finishes that have been retained are very far from being precious. Similarly, from the scribble wall to the juke box and soft seating, there is an invitation to go a little daft and for individuals to express themselves. The space is designed to appeal to a certain kind of person, and creativity, for the time being, continues in full swing.

Maclay Murray & Spens are lawyers with a serious reputation to maintain. For them haa's design not surprisingly has less of the beanbags and industrial floor finishes but is just as lively in its use of light and colour. The creativity bit comes in the way that workspaces have been carefully tuned to the way in which individuals wish to work. Left to their own devices most lawyers would call for individual offices where they could close the door to concentrate and then pile the floor with files in progress.

Maclay's office remains traditional in that there are still a large number of enclosed offices, but these are glass-fronted and open and the danger of individuals becoming squirreled away into corners has been counteracted with open views and circulation routes that encourage stopping and metaphorical bumping into others. "Lack of disturbance" has been carefully differentiated from privacy and security with the use of glass, half-height screens, slatted screens, alcoves and a separation of client areas from staff areas. The space is 'designed' certainly with a corporateness and contemporary stylishness but, like DAG, is robust, with the ability to accommodate a range of clutter and personal workstyles. Although there is a rigorous space planning logic, individual desks can be positioned to suit personal preferences. Reconfiguring teams is not particularly easy on the general floors, but a specific project area allows groups to come together when necessary and meeting rooms abound for endless lawyers' talk.

In the case of both projects, the process for coming up with an optimum solution was not as elaborate and democratic as it is in the case of some organisations, but rather than trying to reach some sort of balanced consensus or deadly political compromise on what should take place, each firm has given itself the chance to evolve. In the case of Maclay's where acquisitions and departmental change have continued throughout the design and building process, the office has been tested to the nth degree and shaken itself down in the process. For DAG change might still be round the corner, but when it comes hopefully nothing is so precious that it can't be chopped about, thrown in the skip and reconfigured to suit new requirements.

Is it all worth it ? The benefits are dependent on a host of different factors and sometimes emerge some way into the life of a building. In terms of sensing the vibes, both projects feel good so far and it seems more than coincidental that most firms take on a new lease of life after going through a face-lift and a fit-out. It might just be that the process gives the opportunity for new management ideas to take off or that it gives a shake-up to people's belief in themselves. Either way the process certainly indicates that office space cannot afford to be passive in the re-engineering of a company. Change must take place and more than just "not preventing change", office space has the ability to make individuals and the company as a whole feel that change is possible.

Hugh Anderson
haa design