

## Flexibility - Myth or Miracle

Flexibility is a word trotted out ever so easily. To deal with the future, unknown clients/unknown markets, we all want our office buildings to be 'flexible'. And with the new notion of "Flexible Working" there is even more demand that buildings should be so.

There can be a technological response to flexibility or one that calls for a more sophisticated understanding of space planning, the way people actually work and the process required for reaching this design solution. This latter approach is increasingly relevant as we start to take on the notion of flexible working.

With regard to the technological response, the last 50 years of modern office building have come up with a variety of 'cure-alls' which have been seized upon by desperate users and a willing supply industry. In simple terms, the technological response has focussed around the provision of large, column-free space and with this have come developments in air conditioning, various forms of so-called 'demountable' partitioning, raised floor systems, a plethora of cable managed furniture systems, not to mention advances in our understanding of modularity and the notion of "shell" and "core". The developments have been considerable and are not to be knocked, but they are also limited - a fact which is not always admitted by those bent on securing a deal, or appreciated by the user - until too late.

Thus, deep-plan space, if it is not supported by a sophisticated and costly air-conditioning system can, in fact, be highly restrictive (as anyone who has dared to start introducing enclosed spaces into an 'open-plan' office will know). Similarly, fully 'demountable' partitioning has been shown to be a myth, raised floor systems and floor boxes are designed to try the patience of a saint and the facilities management discipline, called upon to successfully operate most furniture systems, allows for an office culture about as liberal as the Third Reich.

The fact that technology has its limitations is one thing, the fact that it can lull us into a sense of false security is another. In our pursuit of universal space, we can find ourselves instead with sub-standard space, space where maintenance costs have become crippling, environmental conditions are deadening and the initiative has been taken away from the individual in shaping his own work style with still no meaningful flexibility!

A rather different approach to flexibility, and one that calls for re-examination in this new generation of "flexible working", is **adaptability**. If a flexible building is one which can move (or has parts that can move) an adaptable building is fixed (or has fixed elements carefully arranged so as to be able to accommodate a wide range of different uses). Adaptable buildings do not have to be high tech or rely on complicated moving parts. By contrast, they may in fact make use of some more primitive systems such as natural light and fresh air, which seem to be necessary to the human psyche in dealing with a changing world.

Adaptable buildings have their limitations also. This is not denied. In addition, they are difficult to provide, calling for the careful understanding of where those key fixed elements require to be located. But they have an inherent honesty and thereby something key to offer in our response to flexible working.

"Flexible working", insofar as it can be used as a summary for a host of ideas surrounding new ways of working, recognises the inherent complexity and richness required of the modern office environment - an environment which requires to change not only year to year but sometimes moment to moment - an environment capable of supporting a wider range of working modes than the traditional extremes of enclosed office and open plan. It is a way of operating which puts demands on the responsiveness of our office buildings like nothing before, putting even more pressure on the supply industry to come up with that mythical thing, the "flexible building".

While these new demands have made it no easier to come up with the magic answer, certain options start to reveal themselves as positively unsuitable. Thus the emphasis on variety and ambience, and recognition of the inevitable and desirable mobility of workers starts to support the notion of a building which is of variable configuration and cross section rather than monolithic deep plan. Similarly, such an approach suggests a building which requires to be zoned for different types of usage and a mixed mode approach to environmental control, rather than one which pretends to be all things to all men.

In other words, the way forward appears to be via a recognition of the differences within an overall building and an appreciation of the notion of adaptability rather than limitless technical flexibility.

How to provide buildings geared for adaptability rather than technical flexibility is another whole subject of discussion. What is significant at this stage is to appreciate that it is different, calling for a wider range of skills and the participation in some fashion of the user organisation.

Hugh Anderson  
**haa design**