

New Ways of Working - New Buildings

Wouldn't it be wonderful to look into the future and know what working practices might be in say 5 or 10 years time ? Wouldn't it be nice if users could make up their minds as to what they wanted and we could tailor the building industry to meet their needs efficiently and cost effectively. Wouldn't users themselves like to be able to do this and thereby save themselves the heartache and expense of constant builderswork ? Wouldn't it be nice if the world was different ?

The truth is that change is itself the only constant, and if we have to future proof our buildings, we have to think of something better than telling the world to stop. Enter the idea of the **flexible building**, a concept so seductive that we constantly seek it like that "philosophers stone". True flexibility might prove however to be just as mythical.

Now we talk of "flexible working" which would seem to be yet another call for universal buildings - ones that do not only allow change from year to year, but moment to moment. The need for some magic "cure all" is even greater and with this need there are quacks ready to wrap up their products in all sorts of promises and marketing jargon to tempt the unwary. The further irony of course is that the more complex and miraculous this cure-all needs to be, the more tempting it is that the answer should somehow be simple.

A complex answer lacks not just seductiveness but somehow credibility.

The idea of flexibility is easy enough. Don't make anything fixed, don't have awkward columns or nicks or bumps in the way. Make it neutral and the build your internal fit-out anyway you like. The reality is of course a bit more complicated. Even if we believed that "flexible" translated exactly into "open plan" or "large floorplate", the technical task of creating such a piece of universal space is not simple - or certainly not cheap. The difficulties are worth rehearsing, because they give a clue a different approach or at least remind us of the shortcomings of the bland marketing jargon that promotes the wonderful qualities of "flexibility" in almost any modern or refurbished property being punted on the market.

Even before we started to develop the more complex notions of office working which we now call "flexible working" or "location free working", simple experience had shown that, except in very extreme situations, there was really no such thing as full "open plan". Enclosed space will out. And those inevitable "enclosed spaces" have a habit of wanting to pop up almost anywhere and not staying still. In other words "flexible" certainly means having the ability to create enclosed space; and, to give even cheap modern buildings their due, they do now, for the most part, work to a module and have co-ordinated fixed elements which allow for internal partitioning at convenient places. Similarly furnishing systems are modular and the technology exists for services to be zoned and partitions to be relocatable.

Follow this line of technical response a bit further however and the going starts to get a bit sticky. Services can be zoned alright but make the zoning module small enough to start being useful and their cost leaps up so fast that for all but the most committed developers the benefits are not really worth it. Similarly, take the humble partition and by the time it is truly relocatable, it is sufficiently expensive to make that brave initiative of the 70's and 80's virtually a thing of the past. "Demountable partitioning" now once again means that which you can take a sledge hammer to; followed by an electrician to relocate the light switches, the ceiling tiler to repair the ceiling, the decorator, the carpet layer and probably a few other trades besides.

So too the limitations of that wonderful invention the raised floor. While men walk on the moon and rockets probe the outer reaches of the universe, getting floorboxes in the right place, or being able to relocate them on that instantaneous basis which is what users really need, remains a task beyond the skills of the human race. And along with floorboxes, cable managed furniture would appear to demand such facilities-management discipline, not to mention outrageous initial cost, as to make its virtues pure fiction.

The belief that large empty floorplates approximate to flexibility remains or course popular with the supply industry. Such floorplates equate fairly closely with the best way of maximising nett to gross and, provided that you don't get too carried away with sophisticated air conditioning systems, they also represent a pretty good way of minimising construction costs. Developers, for all their supposed concern for the needs of the user, are (except in the case of their own offices) not users themselves, and the problems and the costs of occupation, 3 or 4 years down the line are really not their concern.

Thus, while the notion of the open plan office is dead and gone amongst experienced users, it remains healthy in the supply industry. But, like the inevitable enclosed office, the lie is starting to out. As occupancy costs are measured and understood more accurately and concerns for sustainability become mainstream, so the deep plan building wanes in credibility.

A somewhat different approach to change is to think in terms of **adaptability** rather than **flexibility**. If, in simple terms, a flexible building can move (or move its parts) to become something else, an adaptable building is fixed - or has fixed elements which remain useful for a range of changing activities. The praises have been sung, for instance, for the adaptability of the 'terraced house', or the brick wall. Adaptable buildings do not have to be high tech, they do not rely on complicated moving parts or expensive fuel bills. Adaptable buildings have the disadvantage however in that quite a lot of thought has to go into where to put those key fixed elements and, no matter how carefully planned, they **will** have their limitations - the same limitations in many ways as apply to supposed "flexible" buildings, but much more obvious at the outset and therefore more difficult to sell.

The difference between an "adaptability" approach as opposed to a "flexibility" approach comes in its basic honesty. Cleverly conceived flexible buildings do, of course, have attributes which are highly useful and go a long way to answering the problem. Furthermore, the boundary between adaptability and flexibility is blurred. But, if an attempt at flexibility merely disguises the limitations of crudely conceived large buildings then the opportunity to develop a genuine response to user needs will remain limited.

It is with this background that it is interesting to examine the new concept of "flexible working". There is a whole host of ideas and buzzwords surrounding the way in which office work is now changing. "Flexible Working", (if it can be teased out as something different from "hot desking" or "teleworking" or "hotelling") is something which recognises that the nature of work is becoming more complex, more varied, less location specific, generally far richer than the simplistic extremes of open plan or enclosed office that were the blueprints for earlier generations of office environment. Flexible working certainly includes concentrated study and areas of relatively simplistic information processing, but the irresistible trend towards greater autonomy and greater interaction would seem to call in addition for a range of team spaces, formal and informal meeting space, touch down space, even something approaching virtual space. And to make matters even more complicated there would seem to be an ever increasing rate of change for users moving from one mode of work to another. Translated into building terms there is now a real need for the genuinely flexible building, if ever there was.

No, the secret formula does not lie in one particular set of key dimensions or some wonderful new construction system.

The route towards an answer (or at least a better answer) does however lie in an appreciation of the quality of this new kind of work - a quality which is a blend of a reliance upon a highly sophisticated (but increasingly spatially benign) technical infrastructure and the primitive nature of our being human and being influenced in our responses to a situation by our psychological as well as our physical environment; a quality which calls for greater responsiveness by the user towards his environment and a greater interaction with it. Thus workers need to be able to plug into information anywhere / anyhow and thereafter need to digest it, give value to it, be creative about it in a way which has as much to do with attitudes and enthusiasm as it has to do with physical opportunity.

A building which can support such a kind of work is not a simple box, nor unfortunately can it (in most situations) afford to be a technically complex box. Being more specific, such a building probably (and ironically) requires to make greater use of such primitive elements as natural daylight and fresh air; it is unlikely to be monolithic deep plan. If it is a "mixed mode" building of some sort it is probably of a non-uniform depth and profile.

All of this suggests that the flexible building of the future is going to call for a greater understanding of the notion of adaptability and the nature of a variety of **fixed** but **key** elements. It will thus be a building which calls for a more sophisticated understanding of space planning than just punching out a furniture module on the computer. It will be a building which understands the notion of facilities management and the notion of time and process being ingredients of design - as basic as other traditional elements. In short it is likely to be a building which is complex in its conception, if not complex in its physical composition, and one that looks for a rather different procurement route than that traditionally offered by the construction industry. It is certainly not a building summed up in a single catch phrase, seductive though this might be.

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