

Environment vs. Effectiveness: Part 1 - Why your workplace matters

To find out how workplaces will change over this decade we turned to Robert Naylor-Stables, Architect, Director of Facilities Development at Austin UK and one of the first cohort of RIBA Client Design Advisors. He told us that changing values are bringing about pressure to humanise the workplace. He invites leaders to re-think radically for future high performance.

Q: Do work environments really make such a difference?

Robert: The work environment is, metaphorically speaking, like Dr Who's TARDIS. Looking at it from the outside, it may seem small in the grand scheme of things, unimportant even. But consider...this is the place where you and your employees spend most of their waking hours. It's their quality of life. Every time you walk inside it's a big deal. In terms of productivity too, it's a time machine that can quantum leap your business into future dimensions. Or it can land you amongst the Daleks - exterminating your team's morale because it fails to support their real productive potential. Anyone who, like me, visits lots of different organisations as part of their job, knows that every workplace also has its own strong personality – its own culture. Tom Kelley, founder of the renowned design company IDEO, said "a carefully crafted work environment is essential to an innovative organisational culture". In the UK, at our stage in economic development and our place on the world platform of commerce, every organisation needs that sort of innovation. Like someone on a Hyde Park Corner soap box, your workplace is yelling a story about your organisation's values. The minute you arrive you get a palpable sense of how leaders relate to their staff, their level of care and respect for employees, effectiveness and productivity, the boredom, the buzz, the creativity, and more. Every morning, when your employees walk in, this is the message they get. That's why top staff who can choose which organisations to consider see the workplace ambience as an important part of the total work package.

Q: How do you define the workplace?

Robert: I'd include any place from an Underground ticket office to a space station circling the planet, from indoors to outdoors, or in between – any place or space where people are paid for the work they do. I'm particularly interested in the built environments where the majority of us work – offices, factories, laboratories. While there are moves towards more out of office working: home, the café, in transit – the traditional workplace is still a necessity for many staff. However, as the trend for home working is a growing one, the home and workplace are compared in employees' minds more and more. Given that people often spend longer in the workplace than at home,

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then the workplace has to compete positively with the home one in terms of creature comforts – and perhaps emotional support too. The integration of more casual furniture allows different body attitudes for different tasks, fewer disruptions, changes of space and pace, choice of energisers, as well as options for re-fuelling and recovery. In effect enabling a more natural long haul productivity through choice and balance.

Dr. Lynda Gratton, a global authority on how people effect strategy, said that “an organisation is only as good as the individuals in it and the organisational challenge is to create a context of processes in which there is sufficient space, freedom and latitude for each individual to realise their personal potential.” The new definition of a workplace needs to include this mantra so that designers can cater for these values - now.

Q: How do you see workplace trends evolving in the next ten years?

Robert: When Apple first brought out a Graphical User Interface (GUI) for use by the general public in the mid 1980's, it was easy for any user to see that its files and folders and desk top, were based on the way any office employee at the time might use their physical workspace. Conversely, a recent article in *OnOffice* about Face Book's new premises in Palo Alto describes how the office space design was inspired by Face Book web pages. For example, some areas were left bare for employees to fill themselves, and walls were colour coded in the same way as different spaces in Face Book. So whereas physical space was once the inspiration for virtual space, now virtual space inspires the way designers can enable personalisation in the workplace.

Environmental trends that gained momentum in the last decade such as recycling, fresh air, natural light, ecological considerations and sustainability will become increasingly important. We'll also see more recycled components and furnishings.

Another trend will be to maximise value for money, through more reduced finished interiors. This means you do without many of the things you take for granted in a building – ceilings, skirtings, and in some cases plasterboard, plaster, paint as well as more expensive finishes – with the potential for significant savings. In 2007 I used this approach in the design of a facility for Astra Zeneca. The experience was quite a learning curve for all concerned!

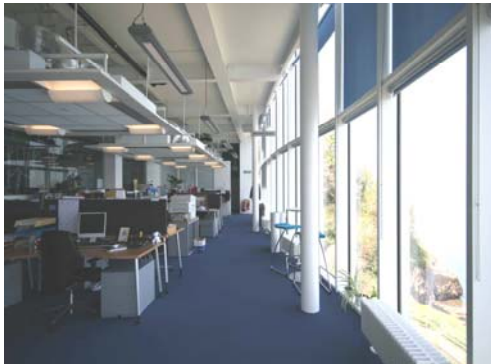
For example, the design team had to explain a new aesthetic and be persuasive about a different design approach. Some contractors had to realise that the building innards would be exposed and therefore on permanent display. Practical features such as pipes, ducts, exposed soffits and prefabricated structural wall components became finished items and some doubled up as decorative features. The construction team had to employ new ways of working and finishing. Lighting design, always an important element became crucial for both defining spaces and highlighting focal points. The work was rewarding, particularly because the client was extremely happy with the end result – and not only because of its cost-effectiveness. I think we'll be seeing a bigger demand for inspired ingenuity stemming from this philosophy in both new build and refurbishment projects.

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The photographs show the innovative approach to the interior design used at AstraZeneca Brixham utilising prefabricated structural components as finished items.

Prefabricated insulated concrete wall panel with offsite assembled port hole windows



*Prefabricated concrete floor units
Exposed structural steelwork
Exposed services*



*Curved profile insulated steel roof deck
Exposed structural steelwork
Exposed services*

Thanks for that Robert. We're looking forward to Part 2: The Part Designers Play, reviewing what designers need to contribute to new workplace design.

For more information on Robert Naylor-Stables' Client Design Advisor role contact Austin UK at: robert.naylorstables@austin.co.uk.

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