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Office

Wonderland

by Joyce Sebrechts, Nisha Relwani, Alistair Drummon and James Saywell

Since the dawn of the white-collar age, office designs have cycled through competing demands: openness versus privacy, interaction versus autonomy. It all started in 1904 with American engineer Frederick Taylor. Obsessed with ensuring efficiency and oversight, Taylor crowded workers together in a completely open environment while bosses looked on from private offices, much like on a factory floor.

Bürolandschaft (ca 1960)

The German "office landscape" brought the socialist values of 1950s Europe to the workplace: Management was no longer cosseted in executive suites. Local arrangements may have varied by function – side-by-side workstations for clerks or pinwheel arrangements for designers, to make chatting easier – but the layout stayed undivided.

Action Office (1968)

Bürolandschaft inspired Herman Miller to create a product based on the new European workplace philosophy. Action was the first modular business furniture system, with low dividers and flexible work surfaces. It's still in production today and widely used. Action is better known by its generic, more sinister name: cubicle.

Cube Farm (ca 1980)

It's the cubicle concept taken to the extreme. As the ranks of middle managers swelled, a new class of employee was created: too important for a mere desk but too junior for a window seat. Facilities managers accommodated them in the cheapest way possible, with modular walls. The sea of cubicles was born.

Virtual Office (ca 1994)

Ad agency TBWA\Chiat\Day's LA headquarters was a Frank Gehry masterpiece. But the interior, dreamed up by the company's CEO, was a fiasco. The virtual office had no personal desks; you grabbed a laptop in the morning and scrambled to claim a seat. Productivity nose-dived, and the firm quickly became a laughing stock.

During the past decade, furniture designers have tried to part the sea of cubicles and encourage sociability – networking – without substituting chaos. Knoll, for example, created systems with movable, semi-enclosed pods and connected desks the shape of which separates work areas in lieu of dividers. Most recently, Vitra unveiled furniture in which privacy is suggested, if not realised absolutely. Its large tables have low dividers that cordon off personal space but won't guard personal calls.

Let's take a look at the office wonderland of 2011. →



Thin Office – Singapore Studio SKLIM

Photography by Jeremy San



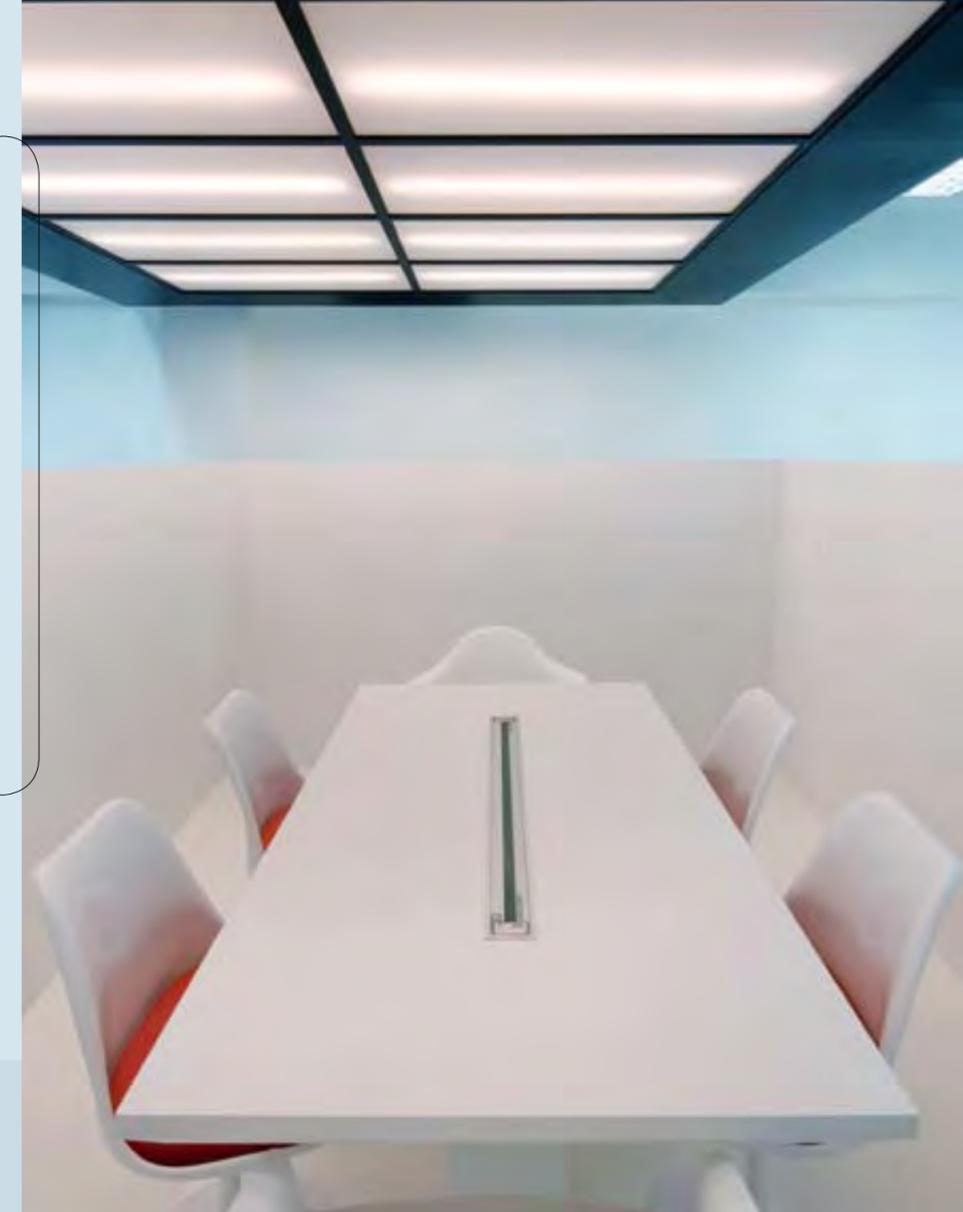
While tapping on a laptop in a cafe has become the ubiquitous platform to begin 'work', the need for a permanent environment for any office is still necessary in the long run. Perhaps what has changed since the advent of 'coffee offices' has been the increasing need for flexibility within a sedentary work sphere.

The programme brief was for an office space shared by an IT company and a multimedia setup. Located in a refurbished postwar building in Singapore's CBD outskirts, the space was long and narrow with split levels, offering the possibility of a raised area. Existing light fixtures, ceiling and wall conditions were left unaltered as much as possible.

The designed space was to reflect the ethos of the companies: flexibility, technology and creativity. The office space was loosely organised into eight clusters, namely: the Boss Boxes, Long Work Top, Discussion Table, Welcome Mat, Sanitary & Storage, Recharging Point, Twist Platform and Multimedia Corner. Each of these clusters, with the exception of Sanitary & Storage, was arranged around an open-plan configuration to allow a multifarious overlap of work trajectories.

The flexible work environment was kept in mind with the possibility of hot desking, informal work clusters and semi-private cubicles. The Boss Boxes were an option for more privacy as some work required a certain





level of seclusion. Technology is a crucial aspect of any modern-day office and the ease of being 'connected' to either an Internet network or a power source was one of the concerns of the client. The fluctuating size of the workforce also entailed flexible working spaces which could be contracted or expanded to fit the demands of this office. The result was the Long Work Top, which incorporated an ingenious power strip of data points, power supply and telecommunication points to be accessible at any location along this table, expanding the number of workstations from six to ten (or vice versa) in just a few minutes. This single piece of stretched work surface became part of a greater string of furniture transforming from tabletop, to reception seating, to storage and finally to pantry space.



The Twist Platform is a raised meeting pod entered via a black staircase that capitalised on the higher ceiling to incorporate a storage unit with a skewed wall beneath. Sightlines, privacy and anthropometrics were aspects important to the final geometric configuration of this space. The Twist Platform thus provided the backdrop to an office party at the Recharging Point and provided privacy to the independent operation of the multimedia setup. The giant overhead light fixture was a final touch to the event space.

The essence of this so-called Thin Office was a desire to remain anonymous and to provide a blank canvas for various work scenarios and possibilities. The 'thinness' was translated from the basic organisation of spaces which opened up a central thoroughfare for circulation, light and natural ventilation, through to the furniture details which celebrated the geometrical state of being folded, suspended or twisted. Thin Office is devoid of ornamentation and a triumph of white lines and spartan aesthetics.

