

# Sevil Peach

## Making the workplace feel human

Conference : Getting the measure *Baukultur* – pour un espace de vie de qualité  
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Parallel session 2: Workscapes

### Introduction

Within our urban existence, our daily life is framed between home and work.

Our private world, our home, is organised around a series of different settings to support and respond to the varied tasks, functions and personal needs that make up daily life: the living room for entertainment and social communication, the study for retreat, the kitchen and dining room for refreshment and conversation, the bedroom for rest. When we work at home, we automatically choose the most appropriate place to suit both our mood and the task in hand, be it at the kitchen table, the sofa, a comfortable chair or the garden on a sunny day. All settings are suitable for doing laptop work, browsing, reading, thinking or making a telephone call.

Regrettably our workplaces, one of our most important public realms, fail by and large to offer this diversity of support and have remained trapped within physical and mental constraints and mindsets that were developed in the latter half of the 19th century, regardless of the fact that the nature of work has changed significantly, almost existentially, over recent years and will continue to do so.

The opportunities and challenges arising from the increasingly interconnected global economy, demands thought-through responses related to the increased need and speed of communication, collaboration, teamwork, reaction and solution.

Despite seemingly living a 'communal' existence, we risk becoming 'singular beings', as we oscillate between these two important realms of our lives, increasingly disconnected from our neighbours, fellow city dwellers and work colleagues, rather than taking advantage of the enriching opportunities that these realms have to offer, including the transition between them.

Within this context and the need of companies to attract and retain the best talent, we believe it is important to develop a new set of criteria that define the principles that should be applied to the way we think about the workplace and its function as a communicative, supportive and human-focused place within this new global and digital world order.

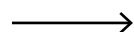
### Building a new approach

With a few exceptions, insufficient consideration is given to the user experience of the building as a whole; their world is limited to the street address and their floor number.

In traditional office buildings, office tenancies are isolated spatial and cultural microcosms, with little reason for occupiers to venture beyond the limits of the ground floor lobby and the floor they inhabit.

Great emphasis is placed on the ground floor lobby, where a transient space forms an impersonal portal between street entrance and lifts. The problem with this is that there is little opportunity for inter-personal or inter-company interaction.

To help redress this, the architecture of the building needs to be shaped to allow for a natural cross-fertilisation of users and the establishment of communicative places. Therefore, when designing buildings, in ad-



dition to the design of the primary elements, the 'set pieces', we need to pay attention to providing multi-faceted facilities that have the ability and opportunity to be prime interaction spaces. Spaces that one wants to stay in, not simply pass through. For instance, the ground floor should become 'the place' to start your day, or to have quick meetings throughout the day.

In planning our new buildings, we need to modulate the floor-plates into manageable and readable zones or neighbourhoods. It is important for the building to be formed around a strong internal armature that enables the occupants' activity to flow unconsciously and in harmony with the environment. It is an armature that foresees and embraces change.

These 'neighbourhoods' should link together, as in the wider city setting, through a network of primary and secondary circulation routes. The make-up of these routes, by which the occupants move across the floor and through the building, can be carefully tailored to optimise the possibility of spontaneous personal exchanges. 'Cross roads' are perfect for bumping into one another, 'bottlenecks' can increase the chance of chance meetings and 'lay-bys' allow for semi-private exchanges between colleagues.

Atriums, voids, patios and courtyards serve to break up the rigidity of the plan and the section. The introduction of a change of internal scale, the sudden increase in ceiling height and openness, the introduction of abundant natural light and indoor planting into the depth of the floor help to form natural focal points. Visual communication between floors is achieved by the void, with generous staircases providing a physical link, encouraging natural inter-floor movement. By providing pausing points, such as extended inter-floor landings, or stepped seating landscaped into the base of the stair, the opportunity arises for spontaneous meetings and quick exchanges, setting the foundations for generating a sense of community.

The building's design should provide a 'loose fit' interior environment. With ever-evolving trends in society, technology and economics, our buildings need to anticipate change and be able to rapidly and easily respond to new conditions and needs. The provision of a standard, uniform, categorised and often, soulless commercial fit-out is under threat as tenants seek more.

### **The changing nature of work and the workplace**

For a long time, work was framed within a Tayloristic perspective, with its regimented and repetitive desk layouts and cellular offices, deeply integrated into the building fabric.

However, over recent years, the nature of work and how it is executed has changed significantly and, in instances, unrecognisably. These changes have been driven by business pressures, advances in technology, computing and connectivity and the need to respond to changing opportunities and aspirations.

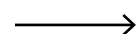
Flexible working conditions and patterns are increasingly the norm. Many companies have now established formal home-working initiatives. How and when we work is often influenced by lifestyle choices. Our work culture is increasingly 'anytime, anywhere'.

As we live longer, the majority of us wish to be productively engaged for longer. For the first time there is now the possibility that six generations could be employed in the same company.

As businesses have responded to these changing conditions, we have seen the organisation of the workplace change from cellular to open plan, with the roll-out of various workplace initiatives. Some strategies have proved short-lived and faddish, however, others are proving more successful, being well thought through, cognisant and respectful of human behaviours and needs. The reality is that there is no one way.

We must therefore seek to create a human and responsive working environment. We need to create a workplace that offers choices – a place that recognises that we function in different ways throughout the day and allows users the freedom to choose the space and tools that best suit their personality, mood and the type of work to be undertaken.

The benefits of open-plan floors are clear in terms of the provision of a flexible, visible, lively and communicative environment. Planned correctly it has the ability to foster a sense of community, a shared identity



and an awareness of shared interests, values, goals and skills amongst the occupants. However, it can also be overwhelming in terms of anonymous spaces filled with repetitive furniture, distractive noise and movement, with little opportunity for individuality and identity.

The internal organisation of the office is also changing in recognition of the increasing mobility of the workforce. Typically no more than 60% of a company's employees are present in the office at any one time, often significantly less. As a result, permanently assigned workplaces are rapidly being replaced by non-assigned team bases.

This helps increase occupancy levels, 're-densifying' the plan to counter low occupancy ratios and to avoid a vista of unoccupied desks, serving to maintain an energy and a buzz in the workplace, which in turn fosters greater interaction between colleagues and teams.

These team bases aid the creation of a suitable and supportive work environment, breaking down the workplace into definable, intimate 'micro-neighbourhoods' that are human in scale, hosting approximately 15-25 people. From experience, this is a scale in which you can still see your colleagues' eyes.

Whilst defined, these zones should be open and interconnected to create a flow of activity across the floor. Whilst distinct, they should visually connect to other team and communal areas to maintain a sense of familiarity and community.

In any workplace, the fear of distracting noise is always a major concern. However, it is also the aspect that creates buzz and awareness. At a reasonable level it is an important ingredient of a communicative space. There should be enough trust, built through social interchange and collaboration, that allows a colleague to politely request moderated behaviour from their colleagues if he or she may need to particularly concentrate without distraction or be working to a tight deadline.

When it comes to work itself, we need to be open to being challenged as to why we continue to do things the way we do, to reimagine how they could now be done, rather than continuing to apply outdated norms and practices. With the format of our educational systems, long years of learning and the undoubted importance of work in our future, we are never actually taught 'how to work'. The reality is that there is no one way of working.

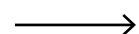
The principal workspace as we know it is often shaped by fixed arrangements of rows of desks. Although desks have evolved to become shared team benches and now incorporate height adjustability functions that allow a user to sit or stand, the desk alone must not solely define the workplace.

People should be free to move around when working, rather than being tied to a desk. A change of scenery is always positive for the mind and soul, allowing us to reset, keeping us energised. Whilst a variety of work settings help with this, it is also important that they support the task in hand. You may select to work on a different chair that provides support and comfort for lengthy tasks; you may choose to work at a large bench that has an adequate surface for laying out papers; you may need to retreat to a private room, for concentrated thinking or for a confidential meeting or telephone conversation.

To speed communication and collaboration, quick informal and unscripted interactions need to replace formal booked internal meetings wherever possible. Within the communal areas and set slightly apart from the team areas, a café and soft seating groups prove ideal settings for both social and work-related discussions between colleagues. Ideally with daylight and views, they allow people to reset and relax. They equally prove popular settings for singular work. In an ideal situation, access to a terrace or patio allows people to experience a change in environment, get a breath of fresh air, to reset, or to choose to work outside on a good day.

Within the team space, visitor or short-term touchdown places should be provided as part of the desking solution. The provision of high benches also allows for quick stand-up meetings, or for working high.

Recognising that a user's mobile phone or other hand-held device is rapidly replacing fixed landlines as their primary point of contact as well as their primary work tool, the workplace must provide sufficient op-



opportunities to allow a person to quickly step away to conduct conversations if necessary, to avoid disturbing their colleagues.

These facilities can be simply semi-screened areas close by, such as quasi-phone booths, or fully enclosed acoustically isolated enclosures. These enclosures, sometimes referred to as 'think tanks', are increasingly important elements within the office landscape. They allow a person to be separate from, but still visually connected to, their team. They provide a setting for concentrated work, for uninterrupted discussion between colleagues, for private conversation or telephone calls and for web-based conferencing.

The concept of a library or quiet room creates a change of environment and a cosy atmosphere within the workplace. It provides a place for research, singular work or can be used as a dedicated quiet working and no phone zone.

Project rooms with archetypal tools, such as white boards, pin ups, blackboards, as well as interactive screens, are ideal as collaborative spaces.

These brainstorming rooms are increasingly popular and important, due to the ability to display and pull together complex thoughts and ideas. They allow for smaller teams to break away for the exploration and development of a particular idea, and thus they have become very powerful business tools.

Closely related to the technical functionality of both the 'think tank' and the 'project room' are fully enabled audio-visual meeting rooms, where remote participants can be seamlessly and effectively integrated into a meeting. Multimedia touch screen walls allow the users to pull up multiple inputs and work on multiple outputs; global communication achieved with reduced carbon footprint.

This collage of activities and spaces should provide support at a personal, team and corporate level. It should allow the team to come together to interact and collaborate effectively, whilst also respecting the individual's need to be able to retreat and to be private, it should yield user personalisation and flexibility, and have the ability to adapt to change.

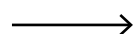
### **A new emphasis**

Office environments are increasingly being compared and ranked formally through certifications, such as the 'well building standard' and informally through the Internet and social media, such as Instagram and Facebook. In the age of the Millennial, this all plays an important role in a company's ability to attract and retain the best talent. The work-life style and balance they promote is now a key differentiator in a competitive market, where corporate social responsibility is ever more relevant.

Just as work has changed from a rigid 9 to 5 setup, to an agile anytime anywhere one. We are increasingly able to take work-life balance decisions without needing to conform to strict rules or expectations on how and when we should work. It is now possible to step away from our 'formal' workplace and still undertake 'valid' work without a colleague or a manager raising their eyebrows. It is also totally possible to have effective meetings in places other than formal meeting rooms. Work is changing from supervised repetitive tasks to personal responsibility and a result-driven approach.

The ability to break away, have a coffee, pause, reset, reflect, converse with friends or colleagues, is an important part of a user's wellbeing. Coffee points and social areas can be strategically placed close to entry points onto a floor, or other suitable focal points. They have the ability to become the heart of the office, evoking a feeling of comfort, welcome and belonging. It is important that this first point of arrival creates an inspiring first impression, setting the scene for the workspace beyond and ingraining a positive association of the company's brand with its employees, clients and visitors.

Trends in health and wellbeing are also disruptively innovating the way we configure the workplace. Sitting down for a prolonged period of time is now recognised as being unhealthy and the benefits of occasionally stepping back from the tyranny of the computer screen and 'resetting', are well known. The intention is to set up simple arrangements to encourage resetting. Not only does this have health benefits, it also allows for that serendipitous encounter, and ultimately for a more sustainable operation of the office.



## **Ownership**

It is important that the users understand that the diverse places provided are for both work and relaxation, that the whole place is theirs to use, but not monopolise. Like a university campus, it should not be about: „Me, my place, my territory“, but rather: „Ours, our team space, our community“.

Through good user engagement, this message of shared team space and facilities needs to be communicated, established and maintained, with the intention that the users take responsibility and care for their environment as if it were their own.

From experience, we have witnessed the benefits of user communication and engagement in the design process. The users may not always agree with what is being proposed or ultimately decided, but we have found that if they are engaged, that they feel they have been included and listened to, their response and adaption is better.

## **Conclusion**

As we now work anytime, anywhere, what does the term 'human-centric' mean in relation to the workplace? The answer, we believe, is at several levels.

We believe it is the creation of a workplace environment that has a spirit with which the users can empathise and understand. A communicated and a communicative space.

An environment that naturally fosters communication, dialogue and collaboration. Work is a matrix of relationships, friendships and social interactions. We all benefit and develop at a personal and professional level from interaction, communication and collaboration. Offices therefore need to provide settings that support and facilitate both scripted and serendipitous interchanges.

If the office is to assist employees fulfil a social and work-life balance, the office building needs to reassess how it creates a sense of community and fosters connections between like-minded businesses and persons.

The role of the office or formal workplace is changing. New mobility and connectivity mean that the office no longer has its traditional monopoly as the productive centre. The office has and will continue to fulfil an important business and social need, however it will need to do this within a changed form and emphasis.

Changing business needs and work practice mean that the users are increasingly collaborators.

The office or workplace is no longer where you need to work, given new connectivities and technologies, but rather it is where you choose to work in order to beneficially interact and communicate with your colleagues.

