

The design for the office: three parallel exhibitions from Washington, D.C. to New Haven, Connecticut show the history and the alternatives of design for the office

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Nina Rappaport

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«Saving Corporate Modernism»
at Yale University, 2001
(Pictures: Nina Rappaport)



The Design for the Office

Three parallel exhibitions from Washington, D.C. to New Haven, Connecticut show the history and alternatives of design for the office

More than ever Americans are obsessed with work, so much that on the East Coast of the United States this year there have been three major exhibitions on the design of the workplace. Work in the US is more than an occupation, it is a preoccupation absorbing all our energies and time. We take fewer vacations, move more often because of a job, and work longer work weeks than most Europeans.

As I sit on the train writing this article on my laptop, taking over the seat next to me for my desk, I ignore the view so that I can gaze endlessly into this screen and then send the article via email to Switzerland. Glamorous? Is it that our jobs require that we must be more mobile and simultaneously complete our work? Or is it because our equipment allows us to be mobile so that we do travel for work? In either case designers are seeking ways to improve the physical environment so that we don't get repetitive motion syndromes, can interact with co-workers, be productive and creative, and maybe take a moment to gaze out the window.



2
«Chill Out Room»
of Stanmyre Noel Architects, 2000
(Picture: Steven Brooke)



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Computer Rendering of the Larkin Administration Building Atrium, 2000 (Rendering: Earl Mark, Khanh Uong and Seth Peterson)

4

Bill Engdahl, photographer, for Hendrich Blessing. (Courtesy Chicago Historical Society)

The three exhibitions on display this past winter, each have a slightly different focus that converge on issues of worker productivity and office comfort and are filled with artifacts for the archaeologist of this millennium. «On the Job: Design and the American Office» at the National Building Museum in Washington is a comprehensive history of the 20th century American workplace; «Saving Corporate Modernism: Assessing Three Landmark Buildings by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill», at Yale University School of Architecture Gallery in New Haven, focused on the corporate design culture of postwar modernism; and «Work-spheres» at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, emphasized the workplace and the intelligent industrial products for the new blurred worksphere of the future. «On the Job» (through August 19, 2001) traces the evolution of white collar office workers and the design that caters to them. In multitudes office workers write, organize, file, and shuffle papers, keeping track of sales, accounting, and product distribution, making millions for the corporation. The exhibition designed in pastel greens, pinks and yellows reflects the busy workplace. Beginning with Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Administration Building in Buffalo, New York (1906, demolished 1950), the exhibit shows adjustments made to accommodate men and the growing female workforce in the new office building. Wright's well-integrated interior of desks with fold-up chairs, lamps and built-in file drawers created a total environment. Amenities were provided for workers such as lounges and cafeterias in light and airy spaces. Management styles were often compared to the military and workers efficiency was tested via Frederick Taylor's efficiency studies for Ford's assembly lines or by time-and-motion studies. As work became a scientific topic, the office worker was regarded as part of the entire operation, not just a tool. The exhibit shows how postwar corporate growth harnessed the new war technologies to increase productivity and rigid management systems. Visitors to the exhibit can sample punch cards, time clocks, typewriters, desks, and telephones and can contrast the mechanical upgrades.

In the 1950s the office worker became known as the *Organization Man* defined as a conformist without room for individuality. The *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* became the stereotype, but he was often not completely satisfied at his job, as depicted in movies and novels of the period centering on office politics and romance. At this time Modernism became a corporate modern style with buildings such as the UN Secretariat, Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, The Seagram Building, Lever House and the Ford Foundation, which are featured in photographs and models. The gridded office interiors were the norm for interior planning and contract furnishing departments initiated at Knoll and Herman Miller. In the 1960s other interior planning concepts such as Germany's *bürolandschaft* by Quickborner envisioned the office layout in project groups rather than departments, eliminating standard employer hierarchies, translating into work pods of today. In the last segment of the exhibition, current

work spaces are featured showing new mobile desks, portable computers, ergonomic furniture, shared computer workstations, hotel offices and amenities such as recreation spaces, day care services, cafes and health clubs. The exhibition designers offer computer survey to exhibition visitors with questions on their workplace preferences.

Saving Corporate Modernism

While «On the Job» investigated the 20th century of office, «Saving Corporate Modernism» focused in on the design and fate of three buildings of the postwar period: Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, Emhart Corporation and Lever House, all designed between 1952 and 1967 by Gordon Bunshaft chief designer of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. On display this past spring in Paul Rudolph's Art & Architecture Building at Yale, the show will travel to the National Building Museum in Washington next fall. The exhibit focused on two endangered Bunshaft buildings in Bloomfield, Connecticut, and one being restored in New York.

The exhibition emphasized both the significance of these corporate modern buildings with their slick glass curtain walls, their reception with the public, as well as the process of their design and development highlighting in turn the collaboration between the owner and designers, so rare in speculative real estate today. At Connecticut General interior designer Florence Knoll,

landscape architect Joanna Diman, as well as the artist Isamu Noguchi each participated in the development of the building, while creating seminal works in their own right. The designers were fortunate to have a client interested in pursuing the ideal of *good design as good business* (a Knoll motto) which contributed to the well-being of their employees. Lever House was shown as both a significant modernist building and a model of a current modern restoration project. Modernism was considered appropriate for the city, but when the similar building type was placed horizontally in the suburban landscape it was harder to promote resulting in the proliferation of lesser quality copies. The landscape design by Noguchi demonstrated how the abstracted hard-scape of the more urban interior courtyards could bring a sophistication to suburbia.

The interiors of these buildings were at the forefront of office design as it planted the seed for many innovations that we now take for granted. Movable partition systems, six-foot module workspaces, flexibility, power grids in the cellular steel floors, anticipated today's raised floors and office designs. Amenities such as a cafeteria, bowling lanes, a theater, a hair salon, a library, a meditation room, a mini department store and expansive lawns for exercise provided the mostly female workforce with activities at their lunch hour and enticed them to work in the country. Emhart Corporation included covered parking, a specialized laboratory and



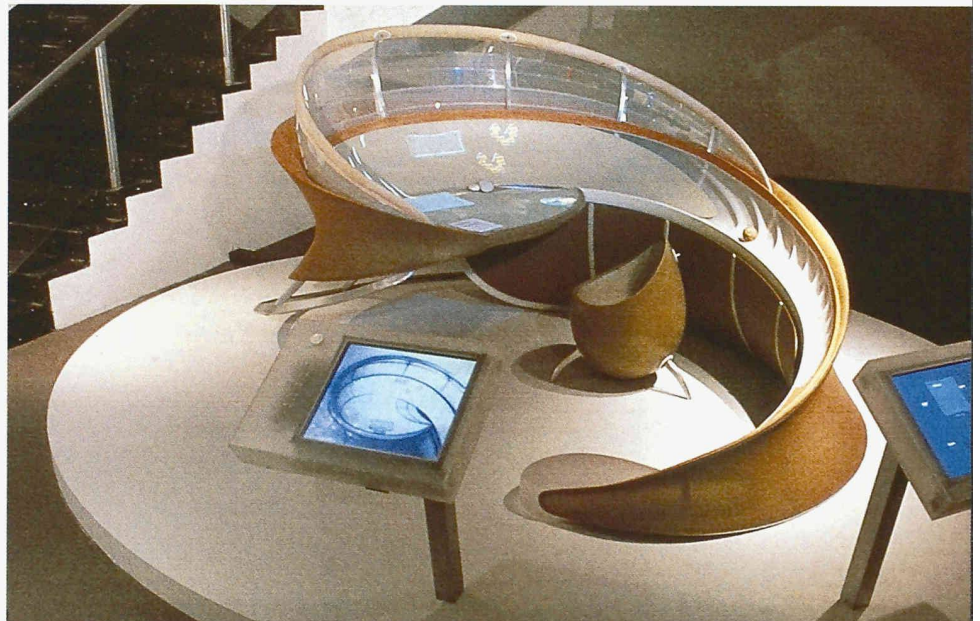
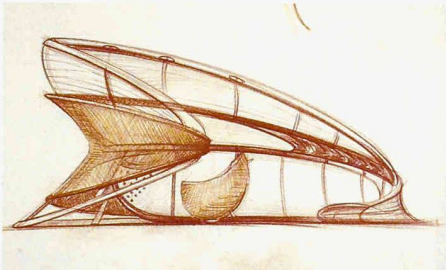


5 a and b

LOT/EKarchitecture. Cargo container used for the Inspiro-tainer. 2000
 (Pictures: LOT/EK, Michael Moran)

6 a and b

«Mind'Space», 2000. By Jeff Reuschel, Ronna Alexander, Brian Alexander, Christopher Budd, Kevin Estrada, W. Bradford Paley and Hai NG (Pictures: Michael Moran)



a cafeteria. The creation of a new corporate image was further emphasized with Lester Beall's graphic design package for Connecticut General and Raymond Loewy's Lever House typeface which was used for the exhibition panel headings. The exhibition design was in the spirit of the buildings on exhibit: Hanging cables supported panels with period photographs by Ezra Stoller; vitrines on thin metal legs with sloped Plexiglas tops displayed original architectural drawings; original models of Lever House and its newly reconstructed Noguchi landscape scheme showed how it will be revived. The proposal to save Connecticut General and Emhart by keeping the buildings in the midst of the new development, was explained and the restoration of Lever House highlighted the fragility of modern materials. A green wire-glass panel showed the building's rusted inner-mullion and raised the issue of preserving the building's authenticity versus the need for improvement. Contemporary photographs by Victoria Sambunaris depicted Connecticut General and Emhart Corporation in a straight-forward and unnostalgic aesthetic reminding us of how their modern design could be perfectly suitable and adaptable to today's *Dot-Com-lifestyle*.

Workspaces

«Workspaces» delved into today's work style at the Museum of Modern Art this past spring with the display of contemporary office tools, furniture and product design as well as six visionary pieces commissioned specifically for the exhibition. Many artifacts were displayed like a product design installation for a trade show. The themes included: Official, Nomadic and Domestic offices, which organized the prototypes and products on display. «Workspaces» emphasized recent changes in the office – picking up from where «On the Job» left off – not as a specific place but as a sphere, or zone between that of the desk, the cell phone, the Internet, and the virtual. A sphere that is as broad has one has the equipment to reach. As the boundaries between work, play, and home have been blurred, many products in the exhibit were emblematic of this new life style and products were featured as consumer items. Six commissioned designs provided the exhibition's only critique by addressing the themes of privacy, home offices, workstations, and time management. Lot/ek (see tec21 8/2001) designed a modular space, the *Inspiro-Tainer* adapted from an airplane cargo container to create an enclosed environment for creative thinking. Padded with soundproof foam, the unit has a remote control chaise lounge, desk with computer and electronic equipment for presentations. Another product, *Atmosphere*, by John Maeda and Joe Paradiso from the MIT Media Lab, organized time and information by projecting data management on a screen. A new work station by Haworth and Studios Architecture addressed the cognitive process of the brain, memory and attention. Their *MindSpace* guided the storage and retrieval of information on a surface that blends into a video computer screen, triggering memory through visual, olfactory, tactile and auditory senses. Naoto Fukasawa of Ideo Japan designed *Personal Skies* to customize work



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H!Bye, 2000. By Marti Guixé



8 a and b
«My Soft Office», 2000. By Hella Jongerius

9
Aibo, 2001. By Hiroaki Kitano (Picture: Michael Moran)



space with chair that could become the color of a worker's attire or project different patterned skies on the ceiling. Marti Guixé, of Barcelona, created a conceptual project *H!Bye* where pills can improve the traveling worker's physical comfort, concentration, relaxation, or refresh the mind, while working away from one's main base. And a sixth project, *My Soft Office*, by Hella Jongerius of Rotterdam, brought the office into the comfort of the home. She embedded computers in an elongated bed and keyboards in «smart pillows» to both work from your bed and relax while you work.

Other innovative work environments that are in production included an office designed by Hiroaki Kitano with a wall and a projection table made of translucent materials that you can write on. A SUV expedition vehicle, *MaxiMog* by Bran Ferren and Thomas Ritter, was the ultimate nomadic «worksphere» for urban or rural assignments, complete with global communication systems, digital moving maps, and video cameras which capture the surrounding views. This exhibition highlighted work space solutions ranging from isolated to communal, traveling to stationary, open or confined spaces, whereas maybe what we really need are design alternatives to accommodate each job.

Nina Rappaport, architectural critic and a co-curator of «SavingCorporate Modernism» at the Yale School of Architecture