

The Wowhaus Movement.
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Suddenly staying late at the office doesn't sound so bad. Architects and designers have literally been tearing down the walls of uniformity, smashing through the hallowed hierarchy of space and scattering beanbags and gourmet kitchens where you'd least expect them. The office - that icon of bureaucratic servitude is undergoing a metamorphosis into a more people-friendly space. The culture of business has changed; our expectations of our environment have changed and architects are throwing away the rule book and even gettin' a little jiggy with it.

Doepel Marsh Architects took advantage of a dream brief (their own) to create a 'state of the art' office environment for themselves that enhances their working lives and functions as a compelling corporate statement. The refurbished premises in Forrest Street, Subiaco are testament to a philosophy of open and adaptable light-filled spaces that enhance communication flow and staff satisfaction. Moving walls of glass create privacy without the bunker effect of individual offices and can be pulled back to open the area for functions. Natural light from the buildings northern orientation flows through to the core of the building aided by a suspended glass roof. A European-style courtyard, outdoor kitchen and hotel-style bathroom, complete the package. Yes, the staff are happy but so is the boss. Intelligent design, attention to detail and commitment to staff has more than balanced the books.

Architect Janine Marsh sees flexibility and staff retention as important drivers backing the trend towards a new concept of 'the office'. "In business, change is inevitable but sometimes you don't know what the change is going to be. Space needs to allow for multi use," she says. "The hip phrase is 'hot desks' - you need to make the space cater for people who are coming and going by creating shared workspace areas. Offices often contract in one area and grow in another area so you need that flexibility built in."

She believes the increased emphasis on staff comfort is a win-win situation. “We spend a lot of time at work and a contemporary office is, in a lot of ways, like a home away from home,” she says. “These facilities allow us to entertain both staff and clients and gives us an opportunity to show people who and what we are. Rather than taking clients out to a restaurant we can entertain here. It is the way we see ourselves marketing more and more.”

Another business tradition – the view-hogging manager’s office has also taken a tumble. Says Janine: “Years ago everyone was supposed to jump when the boss came in. Now the emphasis is on creating more of a team environment. While there can still be individual offices, they are incorporated into the group more. Before you might have had all the senior hierarchy all down one wall (the one with the view) and everyone else over to the side.”

Architect and practice manager Andrew Lian from Woods Bagot agrees: “These days, you can’t really tell who is who. The ideology behind it is that everyone is on an equal footing. Everyone’s ideas are welcome.”

The multi award winning Woods Bagot office occupies the ground floor shop front space of newly restored Federation era building - Fleet House, in the Perth CBD. Recently awarded The RAIA Commercial Interior Award and the Design Institute Best of State Commercial Award, it combines cutting edge design with an understanding of best practice in business.

Woods Bagot interior architect/designer, Zenifa Bunic believes that the move toward a more open collaborative environment promotes communication flow. “The old style office with enclosed spaces tended to create knowledge silos. It doesn’t promote collaboration which is the key to our work,” she says. “In an open plan office you might make connections that you wouldn’t ordinarily make because you might overhear something that has been going on. We find that happens all the time.”

In their studio environment a series of adaptable tables act as pivot points for an ebb and flow of activity. “People can pull up to them with little stools that just get dragged around the office. You can sit down next to someone and go through a problem if it is just an ad hoc thing or if it is more like a workshop where you need to spend a longer period of time we use the work tables along the windows,” says Zenifa.

Floor to ceiling windows bring the light in and transparent partitioning ensures that ambient light suffuses throughout the entire space. The use of task lights and zoned lighting promotes minimal use of energy. Says Andrew Lian: “We’ve only really built two walls and managed to keep a clear view from the back of the building to the street. It gives us a sense of place and doesn’t close us off from trees and daylight.” A commitment to sustainability has also seen furniture reused from the previous office and carpet made from 100 per cent goat hair ensures that no volatile organic compounds (VOC) are released into the air.

In a recent company survey, staff recorded one of their highest documented levels of workplace satisfaction. It seems the new office is taking care of business.

Retail

The ubiquitous Internet has impacted on many areas of our lives, not the least being the creation of the global shopper. When you can source a product on-line from pretty much any where in the world - 24 hours a day, price it against competitors and have it shipped and delivered to your door within a matter of days; where does that leave the storefront down the road? Popping down to the shops may never be the same again as retail environments gradually morph into leisure destinations designed to provoke sensory and even emotional experiences.

Tom Brooking, whose design practice has overseen the creation of cutting edge groovy store concepts like Soul Outlet (womens shoes), Live Clothing (fashion), Frugivorous

(juice outlet) and Planet Books (cool bookworms), has seen the world of retail gradually transform from a functional plain Jane to a flamboyant drama queen.

“I’ve seen things change over the last ten years,” he says. “Westfield was the first retail group to demand that people look a bit further than just a shop front. Fifteen years ago if you had an illuminated sign out of the front of the store and a gyprock bulkhead, well that was probably all you needed to be a success in the retail industry.”

These days he sees a vastly expanded role for an architect/interior designer that requires the creation of a “total retail solution.” Says Tom: “The biggest thing that you can do in a retail environment is to try and create a sense of movement. When you walk in there will be music and visual effects. It is very much like what we do at clubs, which is to give the consumer an experience. It’s about stepping out of reality and into an environment designed to stimulate you, get your attention and provide cues for certain products.”

How do you get attention in a saturated market? You find an edge says Tom through concept-based retail strategically marketed towards a certain demographic. Architect Craig Riley from RAD Architecture agrees: “there’s no doubt that although the end result is the purchase - the lead up to the purchase is just as important. The way people perceive themselves and relate their own identity to the brand draws people in just as much as the space itself. So the client (the purchaser) has their own demographic that you need to identify when you set out to design a project. It fundamentally comes from the client and the project itself as to how you present it or display the items.”

Andrea Veccia-Scavalli from Matthews Architecture, whose design of retail outlet Test Tube in Mount Lawley, took out the Small Project architecture award at the RAIA agrees that the science and art of pulling together a brief can be a complex equation. “The artistic side needs to be married with a technical understanding of not only the physical elements of how you put the building together and the social consequence of size and scale overshadowing the context but the user group and where they fit into the equation,”

he says. “ The end user tends to look at the space with very different eyes than the architect.”

The quirky design of Test Tube whose products are a world sourced curatorial mix of high end homewares and ephemera has been applauded as a perfect example of what is possible when a client, architect and builder work as a collective to achieve a desirable outcome. Lighting specialists – Mondo Luce and brand designers Block Branding were also instrumental in creating an ambience that helped to draw the target market in whilst keeping the visually arresting products as the star focus. In this case the twin constraints of a tight budget and relatively small floor space were worked with rather than against.

Says Andrea: “We saw some real benefits in the repetition of things like the pigeon hole boxes by making more of that length and really attracting people down the length of the space - laying the timbers horizontally also helped with that.” An upside down graphic of a cloud on the far wall by Block Branding was also used as a lure. “Block Branding had a bit of fun with it and by turning the clouds upside down made it out of the ordinary which jelled with the catch cry of Test Tube which offer out of the ordinary products,” he says.

In his recent book on the phenomenon of the new retail environment, Otto Riewoldt concluded that now more than ever before “the customer is king.” He identified dramatization as a core strategic response to the challenges of e-commerce. RAD Architectures design of Sorbet Day Spa in Mindarie, commended at the 2007 RAI Awards is a striking example of an environment tweaked to take the consumer on a journey. It was noted for its “orchestration of a series of dramatic yet gentle shifts in spatial ambience essential to the client’s experience.” Its store front design, described as “sensuous”, leads a client through a series of mood altering spaces delineated through colour, lighting and wall curvature to provide a complementary element to the services and products on offer.

It is good to be the king!

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