

Collaborate

Stephen Edge

Summary

What links Leonardo DiCaprio, the smell of Dunkin Doughnuts, Monsieur Hulot and collaborative workspaces? Sustainable interior designer and academic Stephen Edge has written a short article to launch the new website, based on Connection's new promotional theme of Collaborate. This is one of a series of articles over the coming months, exploring the impact of technology and spatial psychology on the design and configurations of workspace furniture.

In this first article he compares the 1970s German philosophy of Bürolandschaft, the interior design and space planning methods, of open plan office landscaping, with how we sense the new technologically driven collaborative workspaces of today.

'We shape buildings; thereafter they shape us' Winston Churchill 1944

I read last year that film star Leonardo DiCaprio had bought a 'Wellness' apartment in New York City for \$10 million, which has Vitamin C added to the water coming out of his shower and aromatherapy oils pumped through his Air Conditioning. I would be interested to see how long it is before this building starts to shape Mr DiCaprio and maybe even make him healthier. The interior space is arguably the most complex part of a building to shape and how a building 'performs' in response to the interior designers' vision, is key to ensuring that the occupiers are satisfied with the end result. The impact of technology particularly in this century so far, has had a defining influence on how we sense, measure and gauge the levels of satisfaction that our clients expect.

I've therefore been looking forward to writing this series of articles for a long time for Connection. As it's enabled me to reflect on over 40 years of designing workspaces, or office design as it was then when I first started designing commercial interiors in 1973 during Ted Heaths '3 day a week' regime. In particular I want to explore how psychology as well as technology has changed the way in which we work and learn, and how the products which support these functions have evolved.

I haven't met any major league film stars, but my first major interior design commission that I can remember where 'collaboration' was emphasised as an integral requirement of my design proposals, was for the film company Cinema International Corporation (CIC) in 1978. A company started up by Paramount, Universal and MGM studios for their overseas market, but which was eventually swallowed up by the now defunct video market in the 2000s. Anyway as the senior interior designer in charge of their relocation from Amsterdam to their new offices in Uxbridge near Heathrow, it was my job to create a predominantly open plan workspace for them, as the CEO wanted to encourage more collaboration between teams.

Open planning occurred when walled offices were taken down, mixing startled executives with regular staff in open areas. Unfortunately most executives still wanted to be near to windows, but it did improve communication and it was cheaper to move furniture around than partitions when management systems changed or departments grew. Systems furniture which was designed to facilitate all this was a relatively new concept to me and all the major showrooms at that time were selling mainly American manufacturers' furniture. However our client wanted a European brand and the British makers mainly from High Wycombe didn't offer many options for open plan offices and so we opted for a popular German manufacturer of the time.

My knowledge of large open plan offices then was taken from the writings of architect and DEGW partner Frank Duffy; he promoted the values of the German principles of open plan offices, Burolandschaft. These were organic clusters of teams of workers liberated from the isolation of cellular offices into freeform 'landscaped' layouts, which was first devised in 1956 by German brothers Eberhard and Wolfgang Schnelle, and who in 1963 changed their name to the Quickborner Team, and the company still continues to practice today. They were furniture manufacturers who developed their concept to cope with the problems that deep planned buildings offered. They specialised in storage furniture and developed an understanding of how companies worked, and helped them organise the flow of paperwork, improve communication and morale.

Although the German furniture system was cumbersome and heavy, and navigating a route through large open plan floor areas could be confusing at first, Burolandschaft did help promote collaboration, and it kick started my career for the next 2 decades/

Unfortunately despite the CEO's insistence on open planning, there were several Directors who objected in the long term to being so exposed by the lack of cellular offices, and after several months we were asked back to create screened off 'islands' for them, for their acoustic and visual privacy. However every time they wanted to communicate they had to stand up and look around for a colleague, reminiscent of the frustrated Jaques Tati as he struggled to come to terms with modern technology as Monsieur Hulot in the film Playtime in 1967.



FIGURE 1, JAQUES TATI, AS MONSIEUR HULOT IN PLAYTIME, 1967

In Burolandschaft collaborative meetings didn't take place in corridors or around the photocopier or the printer as they do now, there were still quite formal systems of working taking place. There were no break out zones, or new ways of working in Hives, Cells, Dens and Clubs as Frank Duffy went on to describe how technology was affecting the way we work, in his seminal 1990s book *The New Office*. Technology wasn't supporting collaboration in the 1970s as it does now; most companies we were still adhering to the Taylorism principles of the late 19th Century, where human performance at work was measured purely in time, efficiency and productivity terms.

In the intervening 37 years since my design for CIC, the art of space planning workplaces has obviously become so much more sophisticated, long gone are the plastic furniture templates for draughting, supplied by the systems furniture manufacturers that I used to help me landscape my office designs. Instead we are now fully reliant and immersed in technology that we almost can't work without it. The building design and construction process has become so protracted and complicated, so much so that we now increasingly need the intelligent CAD software of Building Information Modelling (BIM) to help us capture of the knowledge of all the disciplines involved. Thankfully this is very reassuring, because apart from now being able to create a virtual building in one single file using BIM, interior designers can also be rest assured that if they design collaborative work zones then the BIM model will ensure that the spaces not only are fully compliant with all the statutory requirements of the Building Regulations, but that they can also guarantee them to be healthy as well as ergonomically comfortable as possible.

Finally on the sensing and shaping of space, we have had colour psychology being used by interior designers for many years to help workers concentrate or make decisions more quickly. More recently we have had Scentvertising where smells similar to those provided for Leonardo DiCaprio are injected into the air on buses to whet our appetites as we pass a doughnut store, or into hotel and retail environments to encourage us to relax or consume. How long will it be therefore before the advertising agencies find a smell to help promote workplace 'collaboration', or 'co-working' as it's sometimes called, and then how will we shape our buildings?



Stephen Edge - Profile

Stephen is a BREEAM trained interior design consultant and published senior academic with a research interest in using Building Information Modelling (BIM) for Low Allergy design. In particular how to measure, test and reduce the levels of toxicity and indoor pollution emitted from products, materials and finishes, and how they impact on the Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) of specific interior spaces. With a view to seeing how he can improve the eventual overall health and wellbeing of a buildings occupants.

He has an undergraduate degree in Interior Design from Kingston University and a Masters in Interdisciplinary Design for the Built Environment from the University of Cambridge. Throughout the 1980s he was a partner in the London based design consultancy Deacon Edge, which specialised in workplace design and planning for large corporate clients e.g. Citibank, Conoco, Canon, Kuwait Petroleum, British Rail, Dewe Rogerson Advertising and Warner Brothers. From 1993 to 2003 he was Head of School and Director of Studies for both BA & MA Interior Design at Birmingham City University (BCU). His interests in BIM began there, when in 1996 he was awarded a Senior Academics into Industry (SAIS) grant to investigate the suitability of knowledge based engineering software for creating single model environments for Interior Design.

He has also taught at Bournemouth University and Leeds College of Art where until last year he was Programme Leader for BA (Hons) Interior Design. As Vice Chair of Applied Research for Interior Educators (IE) the national subject association group for interior architecture and design, he has promoted the academic advocacy of BIM. He is currently writing a new BA (Hons) in Interior Design course for the University of Gloucestershire in Cheltenham and also helping a Construction Law firm in Cardiff develop the legal aspects of BIM Protocol.