

Grand designs

Ski lodges, a fireman's pole, fairground horses. Sounds like a kid's dream, but it could be your future office space.

By Rebecca Goozee



For most of us office space is drab, uninspiring and – nine times out of 10 – pretty gray. But, for those lucky few, there is another way; a technicolor parallel universe full of aircraft hangers, pulsating TV screens, B52 ejector seats and massage treatments. Google, of course, is at the forefront of providing a thoroughly fun environment. Although physical and psychological well-being is the order of the day, there is also room for repurposed ski gondolas and stand-alone yurts, endless swimming pools and baths full of foam blocks, as well as time-saving solutions like scooters, slides and fire poles.

But Google isn't the only company getting in on the act. Organizations around the world are jumping on the alternative workspace bandwagon. In Portland, Oregon, for example, the Nike headquarters is set on 192 acres of lush green and that includes 17 buildings of just over two million square feet, two Olympic-standard sports centers, a six-acre lake and natural wetlands. Nike's college-style campus was deliberately designed to provide an informal, open community feel.

Likewise, the Oakley headquarters in Foothill Ranch, California, has fully embraced the brand's bold personali-

ty. Perched on a hill, the sunglasses manufacturer is housed in what looks like a post-apocalyptic fortress from an alien planet. The towering fortress is complete with a torpedo, tank and B52 bomber ejection seats. While the place isn't for everyone, it certainly works as a high-tech, creative location for superior experimentation and supreme manufacturing.

Urban Outfitters, Bloomberg, T-Mobile USA, DreamWorks Animation, Hasbro: all are getting in on the act as office design becomes increasingly recognized as a vital element of a successful, productive and enjoyable working environment. And rightly so. Workspace can have a tremendous impact on employees and is critical in ensuring success in today's business world. Increased competition, globalization and the economic climate are all driving changes in the way work is managed and completed. It is becoming more complex, more collaborative and certainly more time-pressured and technologically intensive. And in line with this, the workspace is seeing more demands placed upon it; we are looking to the work environment to foster culture and to positively affect employees.

Indeed, there is logic in the changing nature of work leading to a stimulating work environment, and as such the work environment is a fundamentally social place that can nurture togetherness and manifest a brand. This, in turn, can attract, retain and engage employees. Bingo. There's your answer to why office space has become such an important business strategy.

CASE STUDY: 40 WINKS

According to a recent Stanford University study, Americans average fewer than seven hours of sleep per night, with about 20 percent suffering from sleepiness during the day. So it's no surprise that alongside gyms, childcare facilities and lactation rooms, nap-friendly "quiet rooms" are now making the rounds. Google – the frontrunner in all employee-friendly perks – already feature a number of futuristic napping pods scattered throughout its Mountain View campus.

Likewise, Nike has its nap-friendly quiet rooms that can also be used for meditation. Jawa, a small mobile technology company in Scottsdale, Arizona, has two resting rooms for snoozing, while Ben & Jerry's provides unofficial space to grab 40 winks. Other companies have opted to outsource their daytime sleeping solutions. Newsweek, Time Warner and a whole host of other companies use Yelo, a napping spa in midtown Manhattan, New York, that offers naps in "cocoon-like" treatment rooms. A 20-minute nap goes for \$15.

While napping at work has become acceptable at some companies, pulling off a productivity nap is not easy and scientists are skeptical about the benefits of snoozing at work. However, Roger Rosa, a senior scientist at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health believes a nap can be worthwhile: "If you've lost an hour of your previous night's sleep, a nap may be just the ticket. If you've been up all night, it may give you a hangover effect known as 'sleep inertia.'"

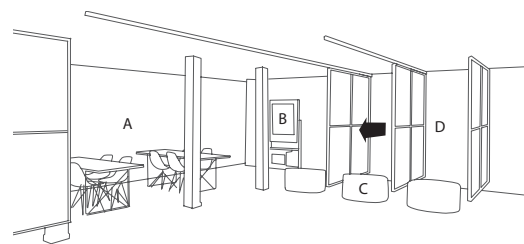
Source: Businessweek.com

Innovation

Kursty Groves, who was working as an innovation consultant when she took a sabbatical and began trawling the most creative office spaces in the world, agrees. "I'd be working with clients and helping improve their internal processes, their skills, their tool kits around creativity and innovation, and they'd get so inspired – before heading back to these dull, uninspiring offices. I thought, 'this is happening time and time again, and yet there must be some companies out there doing a really great job at using space to sustain and inspire people.'"

It was on the back of this that Groves began compiling a list of the most creative spaces before going to visit them. She asked herself two questions: "Are they innovative in their field, and do they use their environment to help them express their company values or help them get more innovative products to market. If the answer was yes, then I paid a visit."

But it's not all about beanbags and massages. Groves explains that one of the best things she saw was at DreamWorks Animation. Here the company used landscaping in between buildings to slow people down for two reasons. "What would happen is that people would get really caught up in their own world, working really hard and just want to get quickly from one place to another. What the employ-



Above:
The Lego Group:
All white, devoid of any color, the Innovation Room is a blank canvas for stimulus and ideas

- A. Lightweight tables and chairs
- B. Flipcharts on wheels
- C. Low-level casual seating
- D. Semi-translucent partition screens suspended from the ceiling track

ees would get is a meandering path to make people take a breath of fresh air and to slow down.

"It was the Art Director for *How To Train Your Dragon* that said, 'It's in those moments when you slow down and take a breath of fresh air that actually the problems you've been banging your head against a brick wall about start to float to the surface. These moments can be really powerful.'" Groves found this particular principle really interesting, claiming that anything designed into the daily paths that people tread to make them stop, slow down and think, is incredibly powerful.

Using spaces to allow and ensure people connect with each other on a level outside of formal meetings is a great way to share thoughts and ideas on the fly and allow for much more positive and productive interactions. Groves

describes how Aardman, the Academy-award winning animation studio based in Bristol, UK, have created spaces that allow people to do just that. "Just by having extra wide staircases it encourages people to actually stop and have a chat. Then, better still, they designed these little booths as junctions between stairways and walkways so that if you bump into somebody and the conversation grows, you can sit down and continue your conversation. It's a really clever way of getting people to connect in a much more informal way."

Over in China, the Ogilvy and Mather Beijing office was awarded Office of the Year by *Media* magazine in 2006. Shenan Chuang, CEO of Ogilvy and Mather Greater China, was credited with the office's success. Last year the company went about revitalizing its image in southern China with its Guangzhou office project, which aimed to grow and nurture creativity in its employees in the region.

With the core business all about sharing ideas and creativity, Chuang believed it was important to express commitment to innovation through a creative, yet professional office space. With this in mind the company designed the office with a "Carnival of Ideas" theme. Bright gold features predominantly within the vibrant color scheme and the design incorporates a variety of textures like velvet, wood and marble. "We installed merry-go-round style wooden

horses, colorful fluorescent lights and lots of mirrors," says Chuang. "Even the meeting rooms are themed. We wanted the space to be efficient, so there are surprises through the office like lounge areas where you don't expect them – complete with fun chairs that rock back and forth – or a sitting area that can be converted into a movie theater. These features bring a bit of whimsy and delight to the day-to-day activities of the office."

Chuang goes on to explain that with people spending so many hours a day in the office she wants it to be as comfortable as possible with large open spaces filled with light and spaces to relax. "One of my proudest achievements at Ogilvy is establishing a dedicated art gallery space. Located in the reception area of our Beijing office is the O Gallery. The idea is to display the works of young and emerging Chinese artists, whom don't have a gallery to support them. Putting art to the fore helps project a funky and modern image to clients and also helps us to attract talent."

Driving behavior

Tracy Brower, consultant to furniture design company Herman Miller, believes that work environments can certainly help drive certain behaviors, such as learning, collaboration and creativity. "It's really about making a

"Just by having extra wide staircases it encourages people to actually stop and have a chat"

destination that can inspire and motivate, ensuring culture and promoting the brand," she says before going on to explain the benefits of office design itself. "The physical environment sends important cues to employees, and the degree of openness in the environment can send messages about the degree to which collaboration is an expected behavior, or the amount of personalization that is available to people regarding what's valued in the organization.

"Even the location of leadership can send a message. Are leaders co-located with their teams or are they separate? The amenities can send messages about the degree to which people are valued and what kinds of things are reinforced in the culture. Even the amount of windows or daylight can speak volumes about the importance of sustainability and the connection to the environment."

Likewise, Pamela Meyer, author of *From Workplace to Playspace*, sees a direct link between the environment and the sense of engagement, productivity and participation. She believes that it sends a message of alignment throughout the company. "A big reason organizations can experience a drop in morale is when they see people saying one thing, but doing another. And that disconnect starts to just shut people down. But it also literally provides more

CASE STUDY: GREEN FINGERS

It's not just workspace design that's important, a number of initiatives have been hitting the headlines; from napping pods to corporate gardening. Yes, corporate gardening. Peggy Malumphy, Director of Compensation, Benefits and HRIS at Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, explains why her company decided to pursue this unusual idea. "I grew up on a farm, so the idea of gardening at work resonated for me from a very personal standpoint. When management suggested the idea, I jumped on it and thought that this was quirky enough to catch on.

"We certainly had some interested and engaged employees and the different outcomes were really tremendous. First of all, our highly producing workforce is sometimes hard to pry away from their desks, so here was an idea that got them some fresh air and interacting with other people with the company. That was the social aspect of it. Then there was the idea that we're teaching people to grow nutritious food at low cost in small areas. Third, Harvard Pilgrim has an acute lens focus on social responsibility. What we wanted to do with the produce that we harvested was give some to employees, but also give it away to organizations or agencies that might not have this organic produce readily available to them."

About 35 people signed up last year and that number has grown to 80 in 2010. Volunteering to plant, weed and harvest the employees spend around 30 minutes a week helping out. But Harvard Pilgrim Health Care are not the only organization with a corporate garden, Google, Yahoo, Kohl, Aveda and PepsiCo have all invested in this unusual benefit.

Bob Eubank, Executive Director of the New England Human Resources Association, says that at a time when many employers are slashing perks, gardens are a small benefit that can boost morale and let companies indulge in teamwork, wellness and sustainability. Who knows, it could even be coming to a workplace near you.

CASE STUDY: CREATIVE COLLABORATION

While researching for her book *I Wish I Worked There*, Kursty Groves has seen many examples of creative collaboration. The Clay Street Project at Proctor & Gamble is a particularly successful one from a HR point of view. “This is a project where people are taken out of their daily role completely rather than try and juggle it with their main jobs – which is how most people attempt to do innovation projects. So for 12 weeks they take 12 people out of the business and they focus on nothing but this creative challenge.

“For this 12 weeks they go to a completely different space, offsite and located in downtown Cincinnati, away from the headquarters. This took some employees out of their comfort zone as it used to be a pretty rough part of the city. This space is completely blank. It’s a converted brewery, and there is brick and big, old wooden floorboards.

“These 12 people, who hardly know each other at the beginning, have to define how they are going to work together. They’re given a raw space and they’re put in this almost entrepreneurial position where they just have to make it work for themselves.

“Not only do these people emerge 12 weeks later with some hugely innovative ideas, such as the Herbal Essence brand being completely revised through this, but loads of big business challenges have been solved in this way. These people also come out re-engaged, inspired and with a deep connection to the company and each other. Then they go back into the business with a changed behavior that starts to positively infect other people with this way of working.”

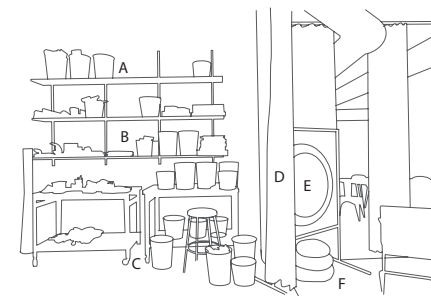
space for collaboration, for unexpected connection, for reflection and stimulation. So when the workplace design, as well as the interpersonal approach, the culture and the climate of the organization support this kind of engagement, we really see a significant difference in the organization day to day.”

Meyer believes that “playspace” is key to a thriving and sustainable, high-engagement workplace. She says that while many, if not of all, of us are socialized to understand that work and play are incompatible – that we should find work hard and stressful and associate play with fun and freedom – it is imperative that we unlearn this association. “What I’ve seen in my own research is that organizations that are thriving have transcended this work/play dualism and so their workforces are simultaneously productive and energizing,” she says. “They’re focused and fun, they’re innovative and also profitable. I write about play space as



space for the play of new ideas and possibilities, something that organizations are paying a lot of lip service to, but aren't necessarily doing.”

Meyer says the biggest challenge is creating a balance between creativity and constraint, and claims that her work is centered on helping people understand where they can play. “People tend to use constraints as excuses to avoid being more creative or playful. In fact, we need to understand what those barriers are and then we can always find some place to play within that and



Above:
Proctor & Gamble:
Essential kit for Clay Street

- A. Open shelves display see-through bins full of supplies
- B. An abundance of Post-Its, tape, modeling clay, colorful pens and other essential creation kit
- C. Furniture cast on wheels provides flexibility for each group
- D. Curtains act as partitions allowing teams to change their 'set' as necessary
- E. A planet gong aurally punctuates gatherings and sets tone for sessions
- F. Rugs are used to create visual boundaries for meeting areas

create more freedom. There is then a possibility for new things to emerge, which makes a significant difference to the level of engagement people experience in the workplace.”

Meyer has studied a number of organizations that are surviving against the odds because they are committed to fostering play space. Umpqua Bank is the perfect example of an organization that has lots of boundaries and a reputation for a sense of stability that it has to communication, yet does a lot to empower its employees, which is unexpected in such a conservative industry.”

Starting from the very first minute of the day, says Meyer, staff start with a motivational moment. “Every one of the 175 locations can do whatever they want in those first few minutes as long as it’s not political or religious; it’s just meant to energize and engage the employees. They’ll do anything from rocking out to a Rolling Stones song, or playing a game of marshmallow dodgeball to get everybody going and get their juices flowing.”

The company also indulges in handshake marketing as opposed to traditional broadcast advertising. “My favorite example is that an employee could be standing in a

Nike’s HQ is set on 192 ACRES of lush green

10 PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVERS OF WORKFORCE PRODUCTIVITY

MEANING: A clear and inspiring vision with which people feel aligned

VALUES: A common set of values and behaviors consistently displayed

OPTIMISM: A positive attitude and trust in the leadership team to deliver

COLLABORATION: Effective teamwork and stimulation through interaction

CONFIDENCE: A focus on developing self-belief by playing to strengths rather than only addressing weaknesses

INDIVIDUALISM: Respect for the unique skills and contribution of everyone

AUTONOMY: Individuals given the responsibility to make decisions

ORIGINALITY: Recognition of the value of originality and a culture of acceptance of good new ideas

GOALS: Clear and specific goals and visible celebration of achievement

RECOGNITION: Being recognized and valued for good work and receiving a fair and transparent regard for achievement of goals

line at a coffee shop and say, ‘I’d like to pay for my coffee and everyone behind me. Tell them it’s on Umpqua Bank.’ Suddenly they’ve touched 10-15 people in line at a relatively low cost, and it also creates a sense of empowerment for the employees,” says Meyer.

What next?

So if the workplace environment can be used as an extra management tool to help sustain and inspire the workforce, what are the key things to consider before designing a new workspace for employees? First, advises Brower, look at the organization’s vision for the future. Second, the company’s strategy and business goals should always play a role in the physical environment, so ensure this is the case. Third, look at the mix of individual, team and organizational needs and balance those. “Give thought to the culture today, the culture you want and how you move from one to the other, using the physical work environment as a lever to get there,” says Brower.

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Groves believes it is also important to understand that it is a myth that innovative spaces make a huge dent in profit margins. In fact, in the ratio between the cost to operate a space versus salaries, people cost around 15 times more than the space ever will – well, unless you’re paying them too much. “If you’re buying things off the shelf it can often be more expensive, so being creative about the choices that you make in the way that you furnish an environment can be really cost effective.”

With new generations calling the shots in the workspace alongside some interesting trends in technology, there is no doubt that the working environment can and will adapt to its users. Groves predicts that as the number of people working from home rises along with people working on the move, employees will be looking to a sense of place and space with an in-built structure and other people around them. “I guess there will also be gravity towards a place,” she says. “When it comes to organizations who have a brand or provide a service or product there will always be the need for a physical place for people to work together. It might be that simply the type of work people do when they’re together might change. Collaborative work will take place in the traditional office space, whereas people can retreat to smaller and more secluded places to carry out more mundane tasks.”

While it ultimately depends on the make-up of the functions that people have as to where they are going to work and the space they are looking to do that in, there will certainly be some interesting spaces emerging in the next decade. In the meantime, keep your eyes peeled for those beanbags. ■



Above:
T-Mobile’s iCreation Center:

- A. A freestanding illuminated ‘T’
- B. A restored pulley system allows for quick transference of large objects, such as ideas display boards, from floor to floor
- C. Double-height bamboo trees
- D. Spiral staircase
- E. People are encouraged to bring bikes to work
- F. Casual meeting areas are created adjacent to high-traffic junctions for impromptu chats
- G. A craft station in a centralized location

