

Last updated: June 22, 2006 02:00pm

## **Office Design: Back to Future**

By Nancy A. Ruhling

---

**Nancy A. Ruhling** is a contributor to [Real Estate New York](#), from which this article is excerpted.

With new technology making it possible for people to work from remote locations, the office has reached back to its roots to become more of an occasional meeting place than a five-day-a-week workplace. Sitting at workstations may not be as fun for employees as lying on the beach with a laptop, but it is no accident that the office is much more high-tech, flexible, natural-light-filled and colorful. "Green" is the environmentally correct hue these days.

"The office has become a recruiting tool for workers," says architect David McAlpin of Fradkin & McAlpin Associates LLP. "Companies used to have a concern for their clients, not their workers," but that has changed.

Architect John R. Sorrenti of JRS Architect PC agrees, adding that good design is no longer limited to the executive wing and the lobby. "Today, there is more color and lighting, and Corian surfaces are being used in the general office," he says. "Companies are willing to spend more for attractive spaces because they realize it will last longer."

The avant-garde glass towers that are going up all over the city provide a visible showcase for architects and designers to spotlight a variety of bolder and more aesthetic materials, notably glass—clear, frosted, textured and patterned—that traditionally are more associated with the living room than the boardroom. "Glass—on the exterior and the interior—gives more visual opportunity to do different things and is a way to separate spaces physically not visually," Sorrenti says. "It's important for people to see outside, and psychologically, we always try to bring light in."

To illuminate the new look, office furniture is being made of lighter woods like maple, ash and oak. And windows are covered with blinds, roll shades or even automated shades that follow the sun and raise and lower themselves accordingly to give an aesthetically pleasing and uniform look to the interior and exterior spaces.

"We also are using new materials—stone, colored concrete, recycled plastics," says architect Guy Geier of FXFowle. "And we tend not to use plastic laminates that look like wood. If it's laminate, it looks like laminate."

The evolution of flexible office spaces has been propelled by the technological revolution that has made cellphones, laptops and BlackBerrys standard office equipment. Although interior design varies by type of company—law and financial-services firms, for instance, still tend to adhere to the hierarchal boss-gets-the-big-office principle, the prevailing trend divides the office into groups of individual workstations and more open multitasking meeting spaces that can be reconfigured quickly and simply. At the extreme end are Mayor Mike Bloomberg-style bullpens, where everyone is equal, and shared spaces where employees are issued lockers and must call ahead to reserve a workstation on the day they do decide to put in an appearance. Regardless of the style, interiors

are designed to work efficiently, and while bosses sometimes still get the corner office with the window, that space is likely to do double duty as a conference/meeting room when they are not around.

Flex space also often means that employees, too, must be flexible. When a project is done, they box up their personal possessions and move to another workstation. "Companies don't want to move furniture, just people," says Geier, whose firm designed the New York Times Co.'s new headquarters. "That leads to more standardized workstations for all. They have the same footprint, and we add different accessories. You're not redoing the IT infrastructure or lighting. I'm not seeing furniture on wheels and departments configuring at any time, anyplace."

However, Jack Tanis, director of applied research for Steelcase Inc., says that movable furniture does have its place—as long as "you and I can move it around on demand" without using special and costly labor.

Because employees are coming into the office less frequently and because they are working on different projects with different groups of people, some of them part-timers, "spaces are designed for intradepartmental collaboration and for different departments," says Pat Hauserman, senior project manager for Tishman Construction Corp., which is construction manager for 1095 Ave. of the Americas. "There are fewer closed offices, and in some cases the furniture can even be knocked down to address the changing needs. The look may be more informal, but it doesn't mean that it's not professional."

In some cases, this flex space begins at the front entrance. When it opens in spring 2008, the former Verizon headquarters at 1095 Avenue of the Americas, which is undergoing a \$250-million redevelopment by its new owner, Equity Office, will have a new stone and glass lobby. Complete with a floor-to-ceiling glass curtain wall, it was designed not so much as a prestigious place as it was to be a comfortable spot where employees can sit down, have coffee at the sky café, check their e-mails and hold mini-meetings.

This creative use of flexible space, at a time when companies are trying to cut back and rents are rising, has had an immense impact on the basic structure of the office and on its corporate culture. While total square footage remains the same, "overall, the space per person is being reduced, but not necessarily across the board," says Geier. "In some cases, people at the lower levels have bigger spaces because what they do requires more space. In exchange, the boss may get a window or a wood desk instead of a laminate or even other perks that have nothing to do with the facilities."

"Office design is merely evolving, not instantly remaking itself, because it must cater to and serve the needs of four diverse generations—the traditionals, who are accustomed to working 9 to 5; the baby boomers; the Generation Xers and the Generation Yers, or millennials. "The meaning of work is different for each generation," says Tanis. "The first two believe that the office is the place to do work. For the third and fourth groups, it's not in the office."

The move toward light-filled buildings has been accelerated not only by architectural styles—nearly every new office building has a sleek, glass tower—but also by environmental and energy considerations. While green buildings aren't standard yet, and while companies generally still don't ask for them, green is getting a green light. "Some of the products, including low-VOC paints and recyclable carpeting, have recently become competitively priced," Geier says. "The economics are

starting to make sense. Many energy-saving devices, including motion detectors and dimmers initially cost more, but the payback is reasonable. In the past, it would be 10 years before there was a payback. Now, the payback is in two to three years."

And the office will continue to evolve. Sorrenti says that in the future it will be smaller and offer even more flexible spaces. "People will share office space—this is called hoteling—and some will work at remote locations," he says. "But there will always be an office because people work well when they have someone to talk to." Teleconferencing and videoconferencing, no matter how sophisticated they become, Hauserman adds, never will be substitutes for in-person meetings. "At the end of the day," she says, "you still need people to perform the work."

Until, of course, employees program robots to go to the office in their place.

Copyright © 2006 ALM Properties, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.