

Evolution of Office Spaces Reflects Changing Attitudes Toward Work

By Cliff Kuang 03.23.09

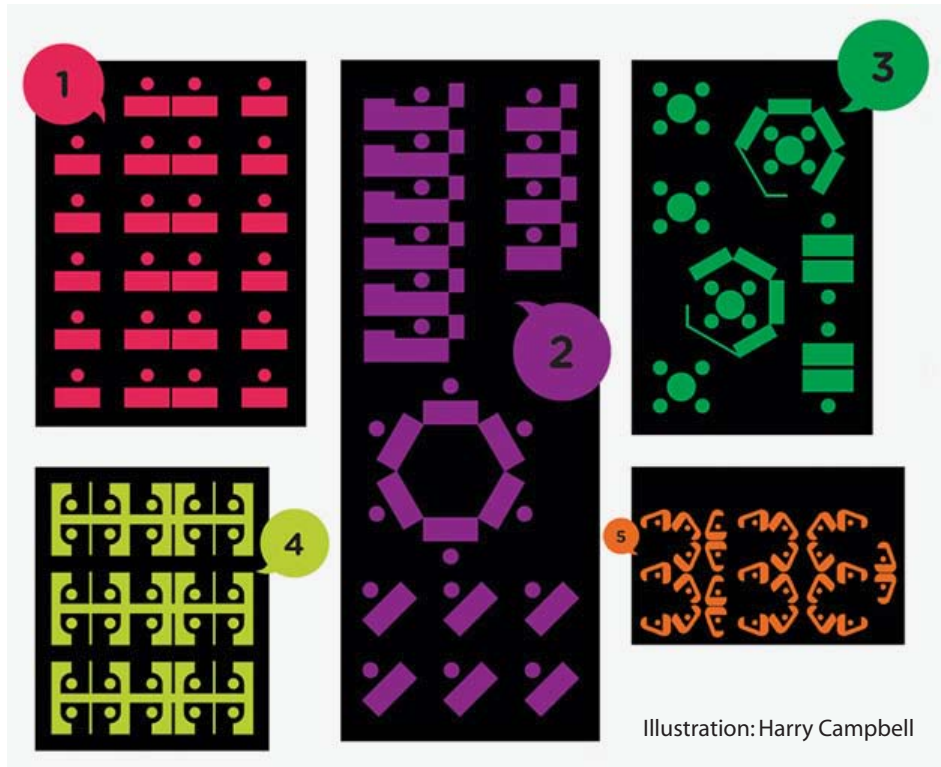


Illustration: Harry Campbell

Since the dawn of the white-collar age, office designs have cycled through competing demands: openness versus privacy, interaction versus autonomy. Here's a brief history of how seating arrangements have reflected our changing attitudes toward work.

1 Taylorism (ca. 1904) American engineer Frederick Taylor was obsessed with efficiency and oversight and is credited as one of the first people to actually design an office space. Taylor crowded workers together in a completely open environment while bosses looked on from private offices, much like on a factory floor.

2 Bürolandschaft (ca. 1960) The German "office landscape" brought the socialist values of 1950s Europe to the workplace: Management was no longer cosseted in executive suites. Local arrangements might vary by function—side-by-side workstations for clerks or pinwheel arrangements for designers, to make chatting easier—but the layout stayed undivided.

3 Action Office (1968) Bürolandschaft inspired Herman Miller to create a product based on the new European workplace philosophy. Action was the first modular business furniture system, with low dividers and flexible work surfaces. It's still in production today and widely used. In fact, you probably know Action by its generic, more sinister name: cubicle.

4 Cube Farm (ca. 1980) It's the cubicle concept taken to the extreme. As the ranks of middle managers swelled, a new class of employee was created: too important for a mere desk but too junior for a window seat. Facilities managers accommodated them in the cheapest way possible, with modular walls. The sea of cubicles was born.

Virtual Office (ca. 1994) Ad agency TBWA\Chiat\Day's LA headquarters was a Frank Gehry masterpiece. But the interior, dreamed up by the company's CEO, was a fiasco. The virtual office had no personal desks; you grabbed a laptop in the morning and scrambled to claim a seat. Productivity nose-dived, and the firm quickly became a laughingstock.

5 Networking (present) During the past decade, furniture designers have tried to part the sea of cubicles and encourage sociability—without going nuts. Knoll, for example, created systems with movable, semi-enclosed pods and connected desks whose shape separates work areas in lieu of dividers. Most recently, Vitra unveiled furniture in which privacy is suggested if not realized. Its large tables have low dividers that cordon off personal space but won't guard personal calls.