

Intelligent workspaces

With more and more of our time being spent in the office, the need to create the right environment in which employees can work – and live – is increasingly important. Why can't the place where you work be somewhere you really want to be?



Image courtesy of TTSP

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TTSP (The Thomas Saunders Partnership), looks at some of the key issues facing designers creating the corporate destinations of tomorrow.

Think of 'the workplace of the future' and what do you see? A tranquil, paperless oasis, disturbed only by the occasional web conference with colleagues dotted around the globe? A *Bladerunner*-style vision of bleak, all-enveloping chaos, in which androids whizz around you incessantly (some might say this happened years ago in certain organisations)? Or just the same boring old surroundings, just darker, thanks to the ever-growing mountain of work on your desk blocking out more light by the day?

Make no mistake, the workplace, where we are spending ever more of our precious time, is – or at least should be – the number one priority for all employers. Without a balanced working environment, in which the needs of employees stand on an equal footing with the needs of physical business activity, the dynamics of business cannot flow to full effect. People are both individuals and team players: their identity needs to be both nurtured and developed on a micro and macro level within the workplace.

So how are designers working with business to deliver workspace solutions that contextualise this dynamic – and what can such spaces look like?

Understanding clients

Insight into how the reality of the workplace can engender a positive contribution to supporting a particular business comes first

and foremost from a strategic vision for the future. Then the client and designer have to be brave enough to form a partnership for conceptualising the design route, encompassing the overall workspace and the detailed items, which will deliver a distinctive style and form in keeping with the vision.

Working recently with a rapidly developing IT management consultancy in Thames Valley Park, TTSP was asked to design a new workspace comprising a mix of elements, each of which had been thought through individually. The first element required was a space within the building with an instant sense of place, which would act as an abstract focus for the company's mission statement, to be experienced by both staff and clients. The solution we came up with was a gallery

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space, the backdrop – and focus – of which was formed by a specially commissioned video depicting the values of the organisation in abstract colours, textures and scapes, which runs continuously as an ever-changing, computerised mix. A space in this central hub location, at the heart of the overall scheme, also lent itself for use as a large gathering space for presentations to both staff and clients, be they promotional videos or major televised sporting events. This space could also be described as the arena for the theatre of life and work, and was designed to fulfil two objectives: on an internal level, to create intellectual status and knowledge-sharing at the entry and exit bridge to the building; and on an external-facing level, to differentiate the company very clearly from its larger corporate competitors.

The next component element required of the workspace was an area with a warm, inviting, homely feel, in which clients could sit and take a break or chat informally. We responded with a bench space with stools, complete with provisions for working on and recharging laptops and mobile phones.

Also demanded by the design brief was a classic meeting and training space, along with a restaurant, café and project rooms. For the former, we proposed high-quality, flexible, modern tabling and seating; the latter elements were approached by formulating a design based on sliding door divisions that allow ever-changing scales to be achieved, creating smaller spaces or large interactive areas. These can overlap, providing interesting routes and vistas linking interior and exterior environments.

In terms of the individual and teaming areas we were asked to provide, our design was guided by the objective of creating a 'responsive office'; what we have created is a state-of-the-art product, with engineered mobile tabling, storage and ergonomic seating. Tables with work-surfaces of various shapes and sizes are also on offer, and a free choice is given to the individual to select their preferred location, either solo or teamed. Enclosures exist in the form of door-height quads, a flexible office solution, folding-sliding wall layout with fabric ceilings and individual task lights. These enclosures can be used as individual study spaces or group meeting areas.

The final parts of the workspace to be designed were team and management offices. We proposed full-height glass boxes with sliding doors, which again can be used as single units or collectively.



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Banks are improving their workspaces in an attempt to retain high-calibre young employees
Image courtesy of TTSP

Changing habits

In the City of London, previously a bastion of tradition, the banking community is showing radical signs of change. High-earning young graduates from a multicultural background are placing workspace quality high on their agenda when accepting a post. For employers, delivering leading-edge environments is a priority in keeping ahead of the competition. Sophisticated workspaces are being offered alongside other perks in the form of high-calibre catering and fitness facilities, and ancillary services like dry cleaning.

'Internal streets' are now appearing within offices, containing Zen gardens, cafés,

breakout spaces and even shops. Employees are now able to move about using mobile technology tools that allow constant contact with the inner and outer world. Work anywhere at any time is now a reality.

At the Chicago Furniture Fair last June, I was able to view of a number of technical products being developed to respond to people's emotional states. Some are rather amusing, such as a pair of stress-prevention training shoes: when worn in the workplace, they change colour as more moisture is released into the fabric of the shoe, thereby sending a signal to your boss that you are heating up and in danger of becoming stressed. This situation may be remedied

by applying ice or, preferably, visiting the breakout area to chill out for a while. Whether big City players will be trading their black leather shoes for a pair of these just yet remains open to debate.

Then there is 'Pong', the robot with a special pair of eyes programmed to recognise you. Picture the scene: as you creep into the coffee area after a heavy night out, your slow, painful progress is punctuated by Pong's cheery voice: 'Good morning Sarah, have a nice day!' Eventual arrival at your desk reveals another piece of kit designed to respond to you personally: the 'emotional mouse'. Identifying you specifically as its user, this mouse is designed to get you out of all those bad habits you have been developing as a computer user in the inefficient ways you have been using your machine.

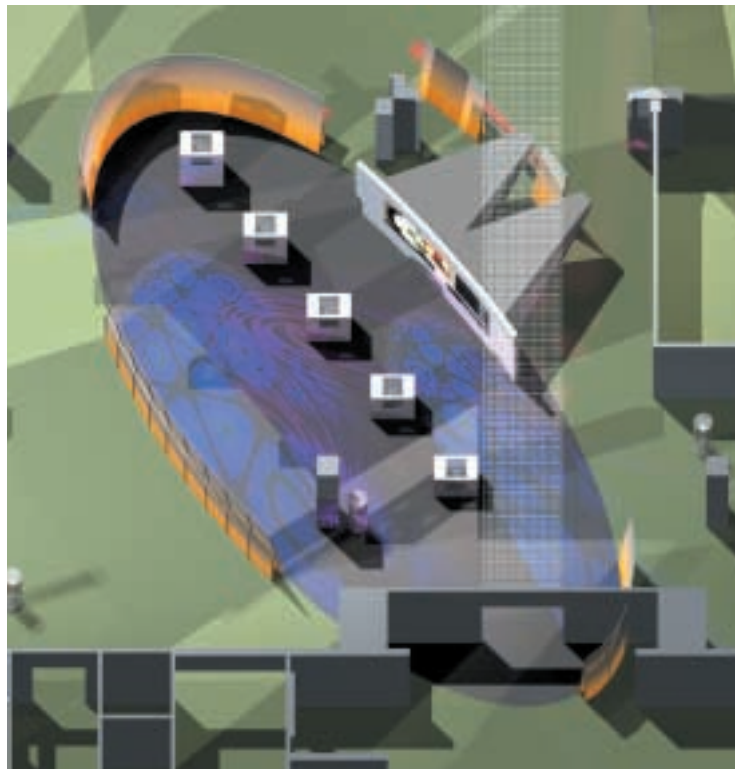
These may just be gimmicks and flights of fancy, but technology marches on relentlessly, creating new possibilities. The cable-free office is predicted by some gurus to be working in many workplaces by 2004. The next generation of communication tools are upon us and will have far-reaching impact. They are smaller, more powerful, have more gizmos and are, as products, regarded by prospective purchasers as 'must have' items, being intelligent, futuristic and sexy.

Futuristic solutions are being developed to address other basic workspace issues such as wiring and storage: elegant tabling is being proposed as an alternative to the costly and traditionally complex furniture systems used to house workstation wiring; and a storage and filing box that is accessed by means of a swipe card was launched at the 2000 Cologne Furniture Fair, designed to take into account the needs of permanent and occasional workers alike.

Employees as consumers

Employees of all companies are also consumers, living in the real world, where the pace of change increases daily. New generation WAP mobile phones compete with microscooters as the latest objects of desire. People are demanding greater mobility, flexibility and choice. Design of all types should reflect this, particularly workspace design. It is vital that designers keep up with the ever-changing requirements of the twenty-first century workforce, whatever the sector or internal corporate culture.

We recently took part in a competition run by a major software company, for example, to propose a design for their new workspace. Interestingly, the competition brief



Space with a sense of place
Image courtesy of TTSP

was informed by ideas deposited by the company's employees in 'a word and image bank' about how they visualised their own future working environment, and therefore reflected the collective consensus of the workforce on their workspace needs and desires. Our response to this challenge was to design a space that nurtured the physical and cerebral aspirations of this young, dynamic, interactive, highly-motivated group of workers.

In anticipation of future demand, we work closely with product designers and manufacturers. We share our knowledge happily, confident that between us we can meet the dynamic challenges laid down by demanding and well-informed clients. We look to the future whilst building on the rich foundation of past experience.

Today's employees need stimulation and motivation, in a flexible and comfortable setting. The corporate destinations being designed by TTSP and others to meet these requirements are creating workspaces of an unprecedented kind: ones which workers can't get enough of.

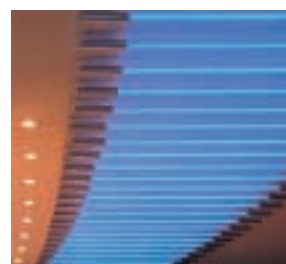


Image courtesy of TTSP



Innovative workspace design extends to new interpretations of furniture Image courtesy of TTSP