

Blurring Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

The dotcom bubble may have burst but like any movement that holds the world's attention, however briefly, it will leave a legacy. I doubt that entrepreneurs will again be lofted to such giddy heights in the public imagination, regardless of their talents, and it will be a while before people are again thrusting money at 22-year-olds on the basis of a wispy business plan. But the legacy that affects the greatest number of people will likely be the change in atmosphere in offices.

FULL TEXT

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By Robert Templer

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The dotcom bubble may have burst but like any movement that holds the world's attention, however briefly, it will leave a legacy. I doubt that entrepreneurs will again be lofted to such giddy heights in the public imagination, regardless of their talents, and it will be a while before people are again thrusting money at 22-year-olds on the basis of a wispy business plan. But the legacy that affects the greatest number of people will likely be the change in atmosphere in offices. Dotcoms made the work place less stuffy and more egalitarian, less about conformity and more about individual expression and creativity. Once you've broken down barriers of formality it's hard to go back.

Near the peak of the boom last year I went to see a Malaysian tycoon high in his eyrie above Kuala Lumpur to hear about his company's ambitious e-commerce plans. Even by the usual standards of corporate pomposity, this office was remarkable. A huge vestibule was filled with enough gilt, marble and mirrors to have Imelda Marcos screaming for some restraint.

Eventually I was summoned up the sweeping curved staircase and entered the oak-panelled inner sanctum. It was designed to speak wealth and power but it felt curiously dated.

“The soulless cubicle farm may still be the default mode of office design but people have realized that new ways of doing business require new ideas about workspace”

The businessman was trying to cast himself as hip New Economy Pioneer but his office screamed Bond Film Villain.

Intel chief Andy Grove worked in a cubicle to be close to the action. But this corporate cocoon gave the impression that this was a man who preferred to remain as far away from his employees as possible, particularly those badly dressed ones in the IT department.

Most dotcoms actually operated out of charmless business parks in offices stuffed with generic furniture. Apart from a pool table and the scattering of empty pizza boxes, there was little to distinguish them from any other corporate space. But those that did try to reshape the work environment created opportunities for architects and designers to rethink the shape of offices, blurring boundaries between work

and play. The soulless cubicle farm may still be the default mode of office design but people have realized that new ways of doing business require new ideas about workspace.

Some of the most imaginative solutions have been on show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. They illustrate the shift from the office as a place where behaviour was to be disciplined and hierarchies enforced to spaces where wit, imagination and teamwork are promoted. The Swedish lighting designer Thomas Bernstrand has created a chandelier for people to swing from so they can stretch out stiff muscles after a day at a desk. To vent office frustrations, he designed pendulous rubber wall lamps that double as punching bags.

Matali Crasset, a French protege of designer Philippe Starck, designed a stool that unfurls into a mattress for mid-day naps, a piece of furniture that could catch on in Asia, particularly in countries like India and Taiwan where many still take siestas. The Japanese industrial designer Naoto Fukasawa created a cubicle which takes personalization of space beyond the insertion of a few Hello Kitty dolls and a Backstreet Boys screensaver. Embedded in the chair and ceiling are screens that change colour. For example, a sunny blue sky can be projected above your head and the chair colour can be set to match your clothes.

In an echo of the Japanese corporate fad of the 1980s for “creativity rooms” filled with reclining chairs and soft music, the New York design firm LO/TEK has converted airline cargo containers into enclosed personal relaxation spaces, known as Inspirotrainers, where one can lounge in a padded chair and watch DVDs. Dutch designer Hella Jongerius has taken the idea further by designing an office around a bed. Softly padded screens and keyboards allow you to loll around in your pyjamas while wrangling that spreadsheet into shape.

It's hard to see any of the more whimsical designs catching on outside of those firms who feel being at the cutting edge is an essential part of their image. But it would do some good to many of Asia's stuffier firms if the bosses sat among their workers at a desk that looks like a giant child's tricycle or perched aloft in one of the bunk-bed style work stations designed by a team from the Royal College of Art in London. These elevated desks aren't just about lordling it over your workers. They are, according to the designers, to inspire managers to “pursue high level insights and long-range planning.”

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