Room for improvement

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ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Some businesses have begun to make space work for their staff, while others are stuck in a different age

By Colin Beard FRSA and Ilfryn Price

In his classic 1964 novel, *Corridors of Power*, CP Snow dealt with decision making in and around government. The spatial metaphor he spawned still resonates today, even as policymakers encourage working without, or beyond, Whitehall's walls for reasons of effectiveness, as well as efficiency.

Snow actually paints a more subtle picture. Although senior mandarins occasionally engage in ritual exercises to determine whose office will host what meeting, real power is exercised, or fails to be exercised, in a rich variety of conversations: formal meetings, social gatherings, learned societies and country mansions. Decisions emerge from a web of interactions.

Some modern workplaces do something similar and encourage a rich ecology of conversations in different settings. But many do not. They still have open plans and cube farms, with ranks of desks drawn up like Roman legions preparing for battle. In higher education and the NHS in particular, the actual corridors linger on. Many of today's workers are still shackled to fixed and wasteful workstations. Why?

A modern university campus offers a clue. Many libraries have evolved into learning centres, supporting multiple modes of individual and group study in spaces that are only occupied at the learner’s discretion. Some of these can be booked, some are there to be accessed informally. Learning is facilitated by individual reflection and social interaction. In contrast, many teaching spaces retain linear designs. Ranks of students are drawn up like troops before the commanding officer. Space is planned and allocated for instruction.

The distinction is potentially fundamental. Today’s economy demands both learning and the most effective use of resources. Firms seek human capital, networking and agility as well as reduced overheads, yet many still plan and allocate space in ways that discourage learning and consume more resources. It is as if places for learning and working remain separate. This comparison might seem simple, yet it is deeply rooted in our perceptions of employment and the workplace. A short history makes the point.

Early in the 20th century, behaviourist thinking, associated with operant conditioning – a type of learning in which an individual’s behaviour is modified by its consequences – and the work of Ivan Pavlov and BF Skinner, dominated. Operant conditioning, matched by Frederick Taylor’s scientific management, was manifest in the offices of the time. Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1905 Larkin Administration Building is often cited as the archetype of this approach with its overtones of the Panopticon and the supervisor gazing down on the rows of workers arranged as manual and stationary automata.

It is space that easily equates with a behaviouralist view of learning. Substitute students for workers and you have the modern lecture theatre.

Approaches to learning gradually changed as cognitivist theories began to surface in the late 1950s, culminating in Benjamin Bloom's spatial hierarchy of thinking or cognition. Seeing the ‘human’ as unique, intelligent and rational, the cognitive focus stressed thinking, remembering and analysing as computational processing through which people sought to understand their worlds.

At much the same time, the coincidence of economic revival, construction technology and reliable lift systems enabled the creation of taller office buildings. Managerial
and supervisory offices grew in size and evolved into finely demarcated symbols of status along the line of Snow’s Corridors of Power. The post-war period saw the rise of professionals – cognitive workers – and their need, or demand, for their own offices. The Shell Centre on the South Bank in London is an early example. Here, the desk was still the managerial or professional workstation across which paper flowed from in tray to out tray and on which sat the telephone. Although more individuals escaped direct observation by the commander, each room’s size and fittings were strictly controlled. Those of sufficient status or power had chairs for visitors and only for the real and on which sat the telephone. Although more individuals displaced straight lines, although the rectangular desk remained – landscaped offices retained the nuancing of status by desk size and furniture. Designer Robert Propst had similar ideas in mind when he launched the ‘action office’ in 1968, but it degenerated into today’s cube farms.

Since Rogers, cultural and social contexts have gained increasing recognition. A range of social constructivist theories posited learning as active and contextualized. Learners were seen as constructing knowledge not only for themselves as individuals, but also through social interaction. While such theories remain influential, they are now positioned among a milieu of views about human learning, such as psychoanalytic theories, multiple intelligences, advances in neuroscience and, particularly significant to our argument here, a widening recognition of the role of the body (embodiment) in learning. Interestingly, in a day and age of ‘in person’ Facebook and Twitter, economists have restored everyday descriptions of cognitive processes: to grasp a concept, to scratch the surface, or step-by-step logic.

Variety and social interaction crept back into some corporate offices in the 1980s. Offices became fashionable, as used in Stockholm’s Scandinavian Airlines Headquarters, completed in 1988, though being seen having a coffee or walking in them was often regarded as not working and being away from one’s desk. Organizations found moulds hard to break. Tom Peters, writing in 1992 under the banner of Liberation Management, recognized interaction when he described space management as “the most ignored – and most powerful – tool for inducing change, spurring creativity and enhancing the learning process in far-flung organizations. While we fret ceaselessly about facilities issues such as office space and square footage allotted to various ranks, we all but ignore the drawbacks of interruptions emerge as the most positive and most negative factors on users’ perceptions of their productivity. Learning centres provide both, with the user free to choose. Instruction centres and workstations don’t; someone else does the choosing.

What is surprising is how fast the ecology has shifted. Jeremy Myerson, revisiting office history in 2012, pointed out that many of his 1990s mould breakers had become today’s global giants. They have offices that resemble university learning centres, though other organisations have also managed this. Some, such as the Government Communications Headquarters in Glasgow, have rediscovered the streets concept. Others devote space to social attractors that combine catering and brand expression to draw people into a range of conversations. Elsewhere, it appears that designs from the behavioural era of corporate offices are emerging. In the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, offices that are square but without corridors, or in rectangular workplace plans with space allocated according to status, alongside a corridor. Why do some organisations remain stuck, unable to make the important transition? Serendipitous organisational complexity, rather than pre-planned, behaviouralist conformity?

In an interview given shortly before he died, Propst made the point that “not all organisations are intelligent and proactively creative”. These companies, he went on, Muntsholtian entities are embarking on tiny, “little bitty cubicles and stuff people in. Barracks, rat-hole places.” Many who commission new offices still think of stuffing in as many individual workstations as the floor plate will carry. In more change, spending £2.5 million in 1999 of his time as CEO of Alcoa: “Having successfully implemented a move to an open-plan design concept where everyone includes the same floor, we’ve seen wonderful changes in terms of culture and quality of work. The entire building is our office.”

This quote illustrates two points that are of great significance to the understanding of working and learning spaces. First, an increasing recognition of the role of the body (embodiment) in learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning. The other narrative has long emphasised learning.