Strategic Practices

Dr. FRANCIS DUFFY, RIBA

Sometimes an outsider can see things that are invisible to those who live and work closer to home.

The conventional office buildings and interiors to which North Americans are so accustomed, in both their high- and low-rise manifestations, are not the only kinds of office environments that are conceivable. Nor are they immutable. They are the direct consequence of the culture, the work practices, and the economy of a very particular nation in a remarkable period of its history. Many features of the conventional office that everyone seems to take for granted–for example, the cubicles satirized by Scott Adams via his hapless cartoon characters, Dilbert and his colleagues–are by no means inevitable. Nor are they entirely an accident. History and ideology made them. They are very much the product of the century that has been called "the American Century." The dominance, the persistence, and the global diffusion of the American model of the office is the direct consequence of the triumphant international success of the American economy in the last hundred years.

We have entered a new century and have begun to experience what it is like to work in a very different kind of economy. Many observers believe that this new economy, because it is based on the exchange of knowledge rather than trading in goods, is tending to become more open ended, participative, and interactive. The old economy was characterized by bureaucracy, i.e., by the hierarchies of impersonal control needed to extract greater and greater efficiency within the closed systems appropriate to manufacturing. The depersonalized culture of command and control and of divide and rule–so strongly advocated by Frederick Taylor and so energetically exploited by Henry Ford–permeates the physical fabric of the conventional North American, twentieth-century office.

Culture becomes implicit in physical artifacts and, once we have become accustomed to it, we find it easy to underestimate its strength. However, the