THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF INTERIOR DESIGN

Settings, the designed spaces within buildings, are "where the action is."
When human or organizational change occurs, settings are where it takes
place first. As my colleague Antony Harbour points out, the U.S. workplace
has been dramatically transformed over the last 40 years, but U.S. commercial
office buildings still have the same floor plans. The settings have changed
much more than their containers. Although settings are more ephemeral than
buildings, they have equal if not greater *cultural* impact.

Interior Designers and the Workplace Revolution

Because of the economic pressures of recession and globalization and tech-
nological developments such as bandwidth (the proliferation of electronic
networks to convey voice and data communications on a global basis), the
workplace has undergone profound change in the last decade. While tech-
nology is given credit for the productivity gains that have swept the U.S.
economy in this period, interior designers who specialize in the workplace
have had a major role in helping U.S. companies integrate new technologies
and work processes. Alone among design professionals, they understood that
these settings are the "connective tissue" that could make this happen.

Interior design professionals understand that design fuels organizational
change, regardless of the scale of its application. Think about where we work
today. Behind the modern city, whether London, Tokyo, or New York, are
nineteenth-century assumptions about work—that it occurs at specific times
and in specific places, for example. Now people work "anywhere, anytime,"
and there are compelling reasons, such as the problems of commuting, to dis-
tribute work geographically.

Not only the locus of work has changed in our culture; the mode of work has
changed as well. In the last century the workforce moved from Frederick
Taylor's "scientific management" to ways of working that are increasingly
open-ended, democratic, and individual/team-tailored. Along the way, the
workplace changed, too. Taylorism was about efficiency (and uniformity).
What followed shifted the focus to effectiveness (and diversity). What's the
difference? As Peter Drucker explains, "Efficiency is doing things right; effec-
tiveness is doing the right thing."

The Modern movement, aping Taylor, took "Form follows function" as its credo. Today, though, we might amend this to "Form follows strategy." If design firms are now involved in strategic consulting, it is because interior designers paved the way. Their ability to give form to strategy gave them an advantage over competing consultants, because they knew how to make strategy actionable.

Yet this focus on strategy does not entirely explain the impact that interior designers have had on the workplace. More than any other profession involved in the design of these settings, they have been able to use their knowledge of workplace culture to design work settings that genuinely support the people who use them. Interior designers make it their business to know how people actually inhabit and experience the built environment. Their work—certainly the best of it—consistently reflects this understanding. The licensing controversy notwithstanding, interior designers today are valued members of building design teams precisely because they bring this knowledge to the table.

Some of the most valuable research on the workplace in recent years has been done by interior designers who specialize in work settings for corporate, financial, and professional service clients. Gensler's Margo Grant and Chris Murray, for example, have done pioneering work documenting the changing strategic goals of these companies and how they play out in spatial terms. Their benchmarking studies give Gensler and its clients a wealth of comparative data about facilities trends across the developed world's economy. Needless to say, this is a competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

As Peter Drucker points out, it used to be that the skills needed in business changed very slowly:

My ancestors were printers in Amsterdam from 1510 or so until 1750 and during that entire time they didn't have to learn anything new. All of the basic innovations in printing had been done . . . by the early 16th century. Socrates was a stone mason. If he came back to life and went to work in a stone yard, it would take him about six hours to catch on. Neither the tools nor the products have changed.[10]

Today, however, we are in the midst of a period of remarkable technological innovation, equivalent in its impact to the cluster of spectacular breakthroughs that occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Technological