

increasing dependence on attracting and retaining more and more empowered office workers becomes an increasingly strong imperative. People who are free to make their own choices in the disposition of their space and time also expect to be much more closely involved in the design process. Such people will want at least as much discretion at their workplaces as they enjoy at home and in every other department of their increasingly complex lifestyles. Even more important, ambitious senior managers in advanced and rapidly changing businesses are showing increasing impatience with conventional real estate procedures and standards. They don't like the standard of service that is on offer today. They want to get their own hands on the tiller. They want to shape office space themselves to accelerate and sustain organizational and cultural change.

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### GENUINE DIVERSITY AND PSEUDO-DIVERSITY

Office users, however intelligent, do not always know the right questions. Nor do office suppliers know all the answers.

One of the difficulties that designers face when designing offices for global businesses is to distinguish between how much diversity is desirable and how much is necessary. Sometimes genuine reasons for regional and operational differences exist. Sometimes pseudo-justifications are invented to buttress convenient cultural differences or to disguise functional similarities. National predilections are often cited as self-evidently sufficient reasons for justifying particular ways of using office space, such as the French preference for enclosed, hierarchical, cellular office rooms, or the German enthusiasm for the super-democratic combi-office, both contrasted with the passive American tolerance of the cubicle and of the deep, more or less windowless open plan. What might work in Dallas or Palo Alto cannot possibly, given such nationalistic formulas, ever work in Dusseldorf or Paris. Such allegedly fundamental differences in space use are, more often than not, simply ploys in the corporate turf wars mentioned above—especially when it is claimed that the same simple preferences should apply indiscriminately across entire countries. In office design, all-encompassing generalizations should always be regarded with suspicion. In fact, in the design of corporate offices, it is always

differences within nations, sectors, and organizations that are more interesting than similarities.

Sectoral differences, e.g., between the way the electronics industry and the legal profession use space, are usually much more powerful predictors for design solutions than supposedly monolithic national cultures. Sectoral differences tend to be grounded in process—which is more accessible to observation and to testing than folkloric opinion. The varying culture of organizations themselves is often strong enough to override national stereotypes. Moreover, on closer examination, different subcultures often coexist totally legitimately within the same organization. Such intraorganizational differences are likely to multiply as increasingly diverse cultural and technological structures develop parallel with the knowledge economy.

### **International Differences in Use of Space**

Generalizations about national patterns of space use can be as misleading to designers working internationally as corporate real estate's longstanding centralizing tendency to ignore or iron out inconvenient cultural and geographical differences. There are indeed many genuine factors that should be used with total justice to differentiate North American office design culture from Northern European, from Pacific Rim, or from Latin American. Oddly enough, business-driven, international corporate real estate people have long often ignored two financial differences to which one would have expected them to be very sensitive: staff income and real estate costs. Conventional international corporate space standards are not usually designed to be sensitive to variations in staff salaries and office rents from city to city. It seems very perverse that the same amount of space should be allocated per person in Houston, London, Tokyo, Santiago, and Cape Town, when the differential between earnings in these cities is a factor of five, and between costs of office space is even more.

Air-brushing out meteorological, cultural, and technological differences is equally common. In environmental matters, air conditioning is certainly not required everywhere in the world. In social and cultural affairs, attitudes toward time, gender, and health vary widely. In relation to work processes, there is still a two- or even three-year gap between the take-up of information technology in Europe compared to the United States, and an even wider gap between Europe and other parts of the world.