Culture and Truth

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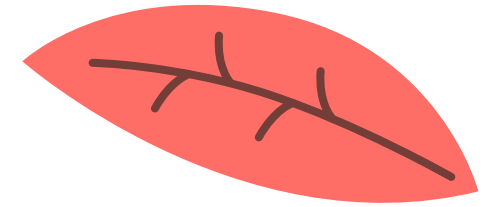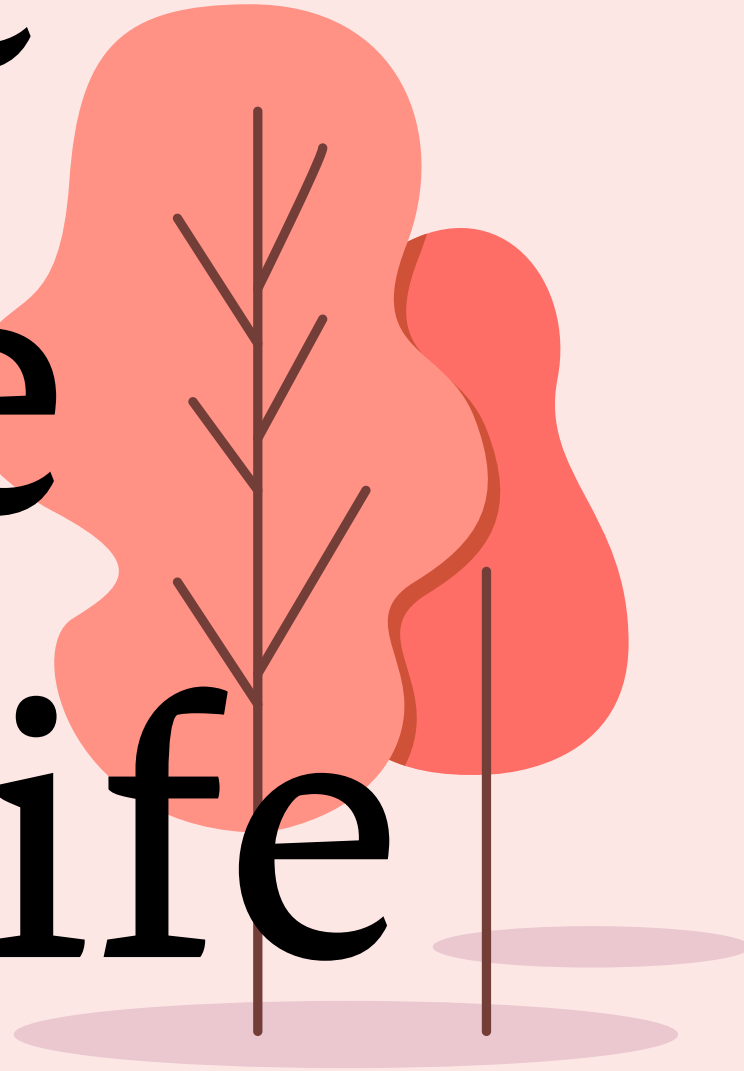
The tree of life

One of the misperceptions people may have in understanding the nature of evolution is that they assume all of life is evolving towards a single optimal creature. But it is not a procession towards singularity; in fact, it is something rather more complex and interesting.

Instead, evolution is like a tree in which each branch and twig is home to a creature perfectly evolved to live on it. The creature merely occupies the branch to which it has adapted best. And unless some external force acts on its environment, the creature will remain as it is.

The same is true of the workplace. Prognoses about the future of work tend to assume all organisations are evolving their office design towards one commonly shared model. But this cannot be true. Instead, we are seeing the proliferation of office design models, some of which are better suited to the shape of each organisation, its people and its culture.

The challenge is to identify the characteristics of the organisation and match them to the branch of office design best suited to them. And just as life on Earth has an inbuilt mechanism which allows it to adapt to changing conditions, so too must office design. A workplace may be created for the present, but it also has to possess a way of reconfiguring to adapt to the changes we know will come.

Defining a new workplace culture

Workplace design is (or should be) inextricably linked to both an organisation's identity and its culture. The issue of workplace culture, and why it might succeed or fail, has become a matter of a great deal of study as the basis for office work has moved on from the scientific management theories of the early to mid-20th Century.

This mimicked the hierarchies, structures and forms of factories. It once prevailed but even now its vestiges remain, often in spite of the decades of research and a changing world of work that show us better ways of getting things done.

Often these are rooted in an organisations culture. As Peter Drucker famously said, "culture eats strategy for breakfast". By which he didn't mean to suggest that strategy was unimportant rather that it had to go hand in hand and occasionally take a back seat to the creation of a well-defined, well managed, powerful and empowering culture.

Researchers often define cultures by plotting their key characteristics along axes and creating matrices that can help organisations define their own culture. With this model, organisations can map out where they'd like to be and consider what effect this could have on their business.

Often these have a direct correlation with the workplace. For example, in their seminal, groundbreaking research looking at the competing dimensions of corporate effectiveness, the researchers Robert Quinn and John Rohrbaugh presented the idea that organisational culture and effectiveness are defined by two primary dimensions that are closely aligned with work processes and space: the degree of structure and place of focus.

Structure works along a continuum from centralised control, order, hierarchy and predictability at one end to more organic processes, flexibility and volatility at the other.

Focus is the attitude of the organisation to its internal processes against its outward looking focus on the market and its place in the world.

If these two cultural dimensions are arranged in a matrix, this yields four main categories of culture: creative, controlled, competitive, and collaborative. These align with some useful definitions of office design which will be explored later but, crucially, are not definitive ways of categorising a particular organisation. Instead, they offer a continuum across several dimensions in the same way that offices should never be defined in limited forms.

Highly flexible flat organisation

Collaborative
E.g. health teams and not-for-profit organisations

Creative
E.g. advertising agencies and software developers

Internal focus on perfecting operations

External focus on being the best in class

Controlled
E.g. emergency management, technical operations and call centre

Competitive
Based on rules of the marketplace e.g. sales

**Highly regulated hierarchical organisation**

A handy guide

One of the authors and management thinkers that has done most over the past 30 years to define how organisational culture can meet the demands of a changing world is Charles Handy. It's a subject that crops up in all of his work, from his early academic writing to his later more personal books but in the context of this white paper, the most pertinent is Gods of Management: The Four Cultures of Leadership.

He first developed the idea of using the Greek gods as metaphors for different cultures as a chapter in his 1985 book Understanding Organisations in which he created categories for four different cultures focussed on power, role, task and person. What is interesting — and no coincidence — is that it closely aligns with the work of Quinn and Rohrbaugh.

In Gods of Management, Handy uses four archetypes based on the mythical personalities of four Olympians. Once again, he does not use these in a proscriptive way, but rather as a way of looking at culture in a structured format wherein the models can be used interchangeably, as needed. By drawing on useful ciphers in the forms of gods, he makes each model instantly recognisable.
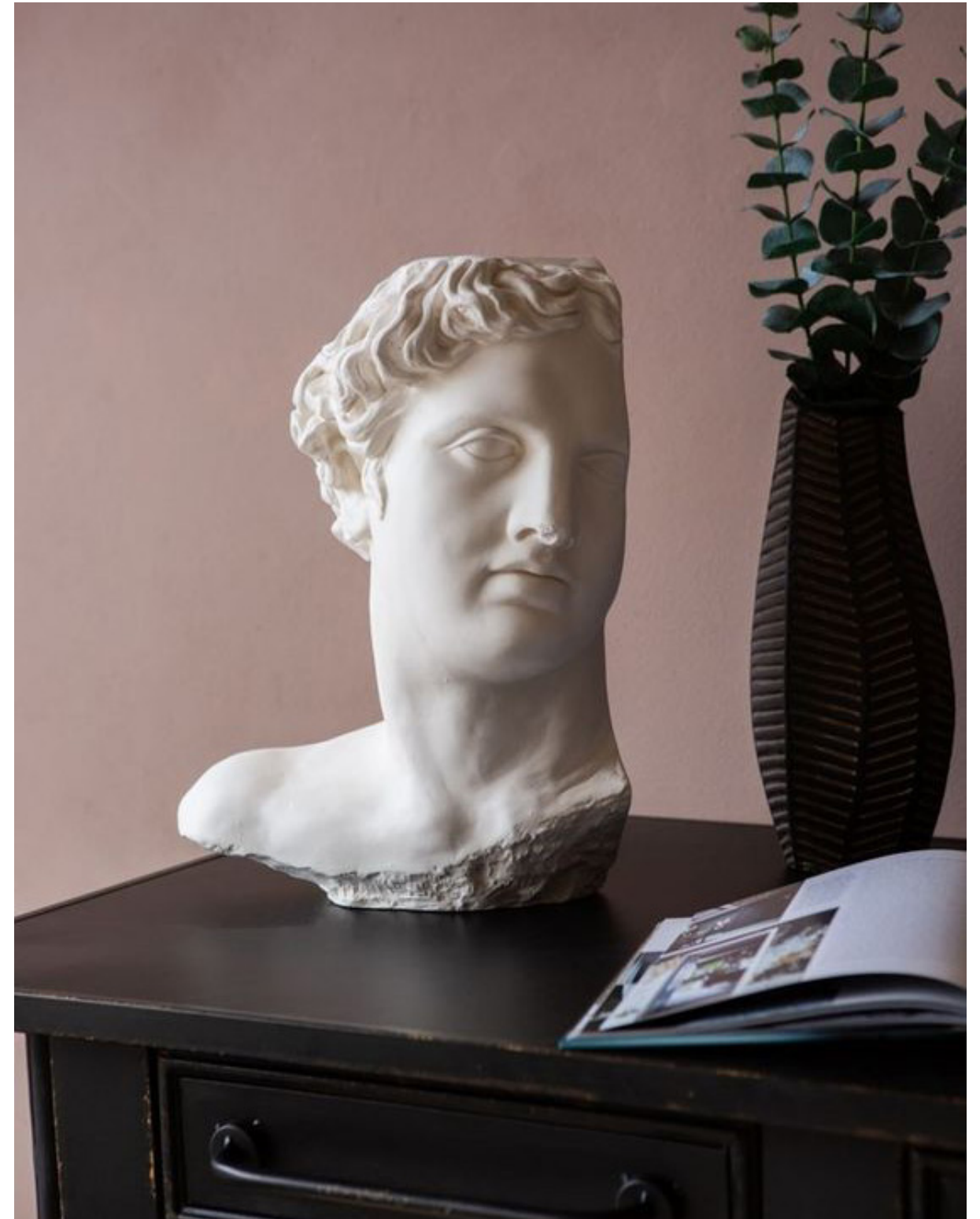
Zeus – power

Power is concentrated in the hands of a single boss or a close knit, small group of bosses. Decisions are made at the seat of power and there is likely to be a great deal of control exerted from the top of the hierarchy. Although decisions are made quickly and in a way which everybody understands, the influence an individual can have on them depends very much on their proximity to the summit.

This kind of structure often supports the idea that "nothing propinks like propinquity", which means that nothing fosters a close relationship better than proximity. While this phrase is often attributed to George Ball, a US undersecretary of state in JFK's and Lyndon Johnson's administrations, Ian Fleming had used it as a chapter title in Diamonds are Forever.

Ball popularised the idea in politics where it came to be known as the Ball Rule of Power which states that the more direct access you have to the president, the greater your power, no matter what your title actually is. The White House, unsurprisingly, is the perfect example of an Olympian structure.

This idea is supported by research from psychologists Kurt Back, Leon Festinger and Stanley Schachter in the 1960s, which found that working in the right sort of proximity to other people improves interpersonal relationships and also means people mirror the attitudes of those around them.

The success of decisions made in such structures depends very much on how well information is passed to Zeus; therefore, it's not uncommon to find a bureaucracy and layers of management forming to serve this need. The weakness is that people below the summit can feel divorced from decision making and powerless, so lack engagement and skin in the game.

Apollo – roles

An Apollonian workplace culture is also based on a centralised power; however, a greater deal of power is distributed throughout the organisation. This means that people are much more aware of their roles and how they contribute to the success of the organisation. Yet despite being less hierarchical, the organisation is marked by clear demarcations.

Typically, there is a strong feeling that things are fine the way they are because that's what has worked in the past. This means that certain ways of working can be more or less hardwired into the culture which can become an issue in times when great change and flexibility is needed.

Athena – tasks

An Athenian workplace will typically be characterised by a high degree of recognition for expertise, both for individuals and their teams. Therefore, the emphasis is on projects and tasks. Decision making is based largely on people's knowledge and experience with colleagues ideally deferring to each other's expertise, regardless of position.

Teams of people are more likely to be multi-disciplinary and individuals can expect to move between projects. The structure is ideally suited to organisations that rely on innovation and adaptability to be successful. Arguably, it is best suited to situations in which power is derived from an individual or team's expertise. The emphasis on talent and know-how fosters innovation, teamwork and flexibility. This is arguably the most common and desirable cultural model for modern workplaces given its focus on agility, collaboration and innovation.

Dionysus – person

In a Dionysian model, the focus is on meeting each person's goals. People view themselves as largely or completely autonomous while management become a lower priority. Decision making is by consent. Less common than the other cultures, they typically consist of groups of professionals, for example doctors or lawyers, for whom there may be no boss in the traditional sense.

Co-ordination may be provided by consent or more formally with a committee of some sort. Such structures are becoming more common in one way, as organisations increasingly contract out work to professionals and specialists whose services are used only as and when required. The downside is that there may be a lack of shared culture and focus on shared goals and so conflicts may be more likely.

The challenge for organisations

According to the Deloitte Human Capital Trends 2019 survey, only around half of UK employees consider their organisations to be effective at creating a positive culture and work environment, and only two fifths consider their employer to be effective at creating meaningful work.

According to the annual study, 84 percent of workers think that employee engagement and productivity are linked, and 68 percent say their organisations do not measure the correlation between employee engagement and productivity. The report suggests that UK business leaders need to think differently to prevent productivity slumps and disengagement. It claims that employees themselves are very well aware of the challenges, with employee experience, leadership and learning, respectively, leading this year's top 10 UK trends.

A good working culture matched to the design and management of physical space will help to overcome such common issues and also foster greater feelings of connectedness to the company. In some cases, this is largely about improving colleague relationships, but it is essential that space matches culture and provides each person with a better experience of work and makes them feel connected to the wider goals of the organisation.

This leads on to the core challenges of creating a great working environment: understanding both the current workplace culture in the organisation and the ways in which it might be better; and being aware of the wide range of workplace types and how these might reflect and shape the culture of the organisation, help it meet its goals and improve the experience of the people who work for it.

Office design & productivity

One of the earliest experiments into the impact of the working environment on productivity was carried out at the Hawthorne Works in Chicago in the late 1920s. The Hawthorne work has become seminal not only in the study of productivity and ergonomics, but also in wider management thinking in that while it was initially interpreted as proof that an increase in illumination in a factory improved productivity levels, things were a bit more complex than that. Subsequent experiments at the same site on the effects of changes like maintaining clean workstations, clearing floors of obstacles, and even relocating workstations also yielded increases in productivity.

When it was discovered that productivity fell back to some degree at the end of the experiments, a second interpretation was postulated: namely that the workers were not merely responding to better conditions but also to the experiment itself. They liked the engagement with the management of the organisation, a factor now known as the Hawthorne Effect.

If the Hawthorne experiment proved anything it was that people don't like being disengaged from work and like to know that their employers are paying attention to them and their wellbeing. The better lighting in the experiment was welcomed and had a role to play, but there was a complex process going on. The lighting itself was not enough without the management and the focus on the individual. We'd take that thinking for granted nowadays to some extent, but then it must have been revolutionary.

This point was supported by the researcher Frederick Hertzberg who in 1966 showed that in his own terms the workplace was a "hygiene factor", meaning that a poor workplace was a demotivator but a good workplace was not necessarily an important motivator. In layman's terms, it doesn't matter where you work if you don't like your job, your boss, or your co-workers. It all has to fit.

A great deal of research has been carried out over the years which has painted a sophisticated picture of the complex relationship we have with our surroundings. For example, discourse by Adrian Leaman and Bill Bordass at the end of the 1990s identified "killer variables" which linked building design to personal productivity.

What is interesting about these killer variables — essentially comfort, responsiveness, comprehensibility, design intent, ventilation and interaction — is that all have been emphasised and rediscovered in other research down the years, from organisations such as Leesman, Advanced Workplace Associates, the British Council for Offices, the Design Council and in books such as Neil Usher's The Elemental Workplace.

When it comes to creating a productive workplace, we can be very confident about what we need to focus on. In terms of the most recent research by Leaman and Bordass, updated to take account of changing business practices and attitudes, these are:

Comfort and control. An environment that is comfortable for most of the time, with plenty of opportunities for changing things should conditions deteriorate.

Usability. Clear communication of design intent, so users of all types (not just permanent occupants) understand how things are supposed to work, can intervene to make changes if necessary and get rapid feedback on whether or not the change required has occurred.

Responsiveness. Rapid response in meeting immediately perceived needs, not necessarily by having good local control devices. Other strategies include the ability to move about and the responsiveness of management to requests for changes.

Comprehensibility. Shallow plan forms, preferably demanding less technically complex and less management-intensive systems (with the added benefit of better energy performance).

Natural ventilation. Some of the best buildings we have reviewed incorporate mixed-mode schemes in which properly integrated and managed mechanical systems are able to supplement or replace the natural ones when necessary. However, to create a good mixed-mode system needs care in design, construction, commissioning and operation which are often lacking.

Zoning and density. Activities that properly fit the spaces and services that support them, not only in spatial capacity (e.g. enough room for everyone, well-integrated workgroups), but for zoning and control of heating, cooling, lighting, ventilation, noise and privacy.

Proven low energy use. Apart from the obvious benefits of lower emissions, this tends to be associated with better briefing, procurement, management and monitoring, which is also likely to lead to better human performance in the workplace.

To add to this, one interesting finding in a 2019 report from workplace analysts Leesman is that most new offices have a major impact on employee productivity in the first two or three years but that this tails off thereafter. A hundred years on, the Hawthorn Effect still applies.

Comfort and control
Usability
Responsiveness
Comprehensibility
Natural ventilation
Zoning and density
Low energy use

A diverse office ecosystem

Many of these variables are comparatively straightforward to implement as features of a building. The more complex issues are related to the creation of a design that reflects the culture of the organisation and to address variables such as design intent, zoning and responsiveness.

It is here that an awareness of the culture of the organisation becomes essential in order to match it to the models of office design we now have available. Fortunately, there are a number of ways this can be addressed. One is to look for parallels between the cultural classifications of Charles Handy and others and the taxonomies of authors like Frank Duffy.

Duffy is one of the godfathers of facilities management, although an architect by trade. His seminal book The New Office usefully lays out four distinct models of office design that are directly linked to the cultural aspects of the organisation. Indeed, he draws on the work of Handy in forming his classifications of office work: hive, cell, den and club.

Hive:

Characterised by individual, routine-process work with low levels of interaction and autonomy. Hive workers have dedicated workstations which they use in formalised ways and for fixed times of work. Workplaces are screened, open plan and impersonal.

Den:

Associated with group work, but although highly interactive may not be autonomous. It often includes a range of settings, and people will frequently use ancillary spaces such as breakout areas and quiet offices when they need a change from the group space in which their usual workstation is located.

Cell:

Accommodates individual concentrated work with limited interaction. Highly autonomous people occupy them intermittently to complete certain tasks and so often to be found shared with other people.

Club:

Most often associated with knowledge workers with a high degree of autonomy coupled with a need to interact and collaborate. A wide variety of shared spaces of different types which people and teams use as they need to. In modern parlance this is an activity-based workplace and a favourite option for a range of creative and knowledge-based organisations, as Duffy predicted in his book.
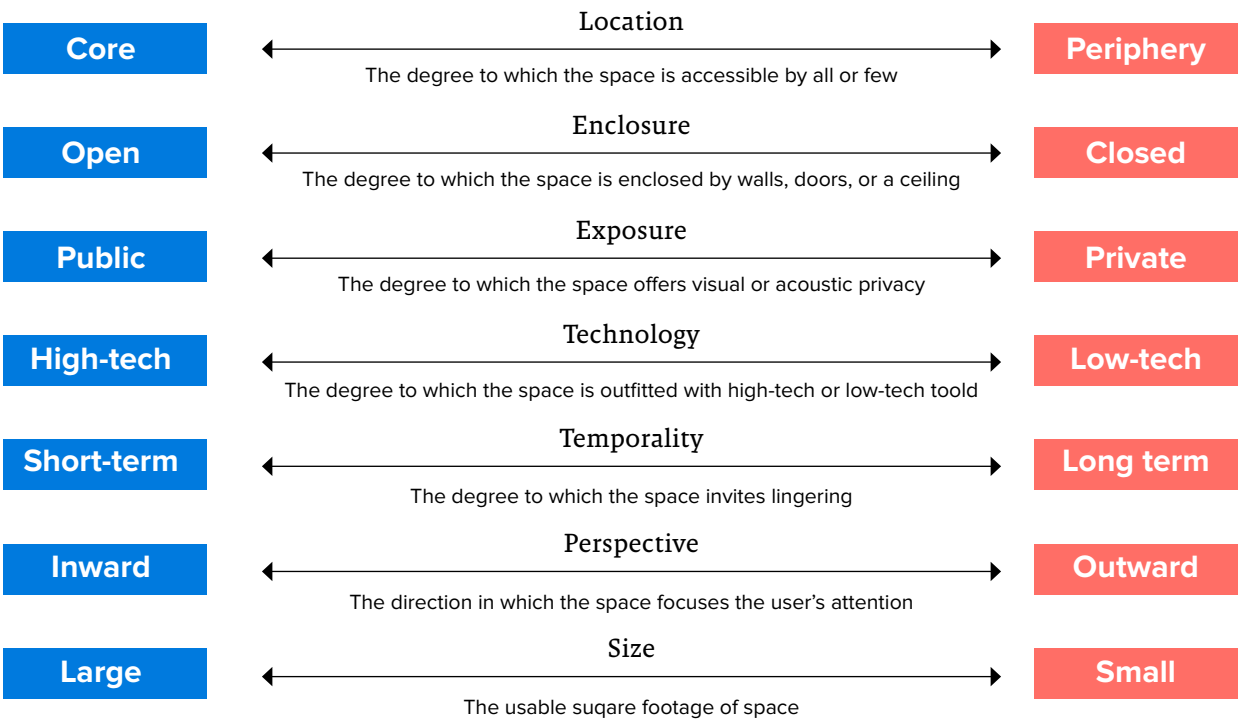
He also predicted how trends in office design would change in response to the changing nature of work. When the book was first published in 1997, the overwhelmingly dominant form of work was the hive with the smallest number of offices being clubs. He predicted this would invert in future although wisely, as it turned out, didn't put a timescale on this.

Duffy also makes the point that replacing one monoculture with another is not necessarily the right solution. Alternatively, he claims that a mix of models may often be the best solution, reflecting the way that cultures exist on a continuum and cannot be pigeonholed easily.

Another way to consider how to match a culture with a workplace design is explored in an article in the Harvard Business Review, which again maps on to a number of known physical, technological and cultural characteristics of the office.

7 Attributes of Workspaces

Use this continuum to identify your company's desired way of working before embarking on an office design project.

Core	Location The degree to which the space is accessible by all or few	**Periphery**
Open	Enclosure The degree to which the space is enclosed by walls, doors, or a ceiling	**Closed**
Public	Exposure The degree to which the space offers visual or acoustic privacy	**Private**
High-tech	Technology The degree to which the space is outfitted with high-tech or low-tech toold	**Low-tech**
Short-term	Temporality The degree to which the space invites lingering	**Long term**
Inward	Perspective The direction in which the space focuses the user's attention	**Outward**
Large	Size The usable suqare footage of space	**Small**

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Making it happen

Of course, one of the most important things an organisation can do to match workplace design with their culture is get good advice. This is particularly the case when it comes to mapping out the organisation's culture and matching it up to an awareness of the options available for expressing it and where it needs to go. It's also the case that individual employees will have some well-established ideas about what they need from their office space. A 2019 report from Herman Miller in partnership with the well-known workplace expert Nigel Oseland found that there were distinct differences in attitudes towards different types of office and working cultures based on the business sector and a range of demographic factors. These forces should be reflected both in the design of the office and the way its principles are communicated to individuals. Design intent and comprehensibility are amongst the killer variables we outlined earlier.

So too was responsiveness, and this is something that should be built in at the design stage both for the organisation itself and individuals. People should be free to personalise and tailor their space as well as their day.

Flexibility must also be hardwired into the building at a macro-level. Not only must floorplates be capable of accepting a wide range of work styles and planning models, servicing must be appropriate and

anticipate change. That doesn't mean just in terms of technology and telecoms but also basic human needs such as having enough toilets to deal with changing occupational densities. It also means having a HVAC specification that can deal with the changing needs associated with different numbers of people and different types of equipment.

Elements of the interior that were once considered static are also having to offer far larger degrees of flexibility including, furniture, lighting, storage and partitions. This issue of flexibility has become more important within interior design. Interior elements should now define space, portray corporate identity, comply with legislation and act as an aid in wayfinding. They must do all this and be able to adapt as the organisation changes.

The most important point to consider is one that has been around for a very long time. Specifically, it is how to resolve the tensions created by the different speeds and life cycles we might attribute to the facets of the workplace. This is particularly important right now, because the way we work changes so quickly. Buildings need to have flexibility built into them so that they meet our needs today but anticipate what we will need tomorrow.

In his book How Buildings Learn, Stewart Brand outlines the process whereby buildings evolve over time to meet the

changing needs of their occupants. He describes each building as consisting of six layers, each of which functions on a different timescale. These range from the site itself which has a life cycle measured in centuries, through to the building (decades), interior fit out (years), technology (months), to stuff (days). The effectiveness of a workplace design will depend on how well it resolves the tensions that exist between these layers of the building.

The principles behind this complex situation have been known to us since at least the 1970s, when Frank Duffy first introduced the world to his ideas about the physical and temporal layers of the building — in his terminology the "shell, services, scenery and sets". The balance between these layers may have shifted significantly in recent years, but the tensions between them continue to determine how well we design and manage our workplaces.

The challenge of modern workplace design is to create an office that reflects organisations exist in a state of permanent beta, especially as they plan to survive in a rapidly changing world. The design of an office and the way it is used can play an essential role in this, meeting the needs of the organisation now while anticipating those yet to come.

This is why the language of evolution and ecosystems is so pertinent in the creation of great workplaces. The days when the overwhelming majority of organisations could get away with creating a standardised office based on a monoculture in which people had fixed roles, times and places of work are gone.

Instead, we work in three domains. The workplace has digital, cultural and physical aspects, and the best are those that can find the best connections between them. In particular, it is essential that the physical office matches the culture of the organisation and helps it to thrive alongside the people who work for it.

Workplace
Futures
Group