



INTO THE VOID

*Creative architecture uses internal spaces to foster interaction and communication, says **Rob Gregory** of the Architectural Review*

Brunswick Arts works with leading architecture and design practices around the world

The interiors of the Centraal Beheer headquarters in the Dutch city of Apeldoorn (left) have remained unchanged since it was opened in 1975 (unlike the equipment on people's desks), providing a spatial structure of balconies and atriums that invite and promote personalization and interaction in the workplace.

Photograph:
© Willem Diepraam

Buildings have a profound effect on our behavior and the way we interact with other people. Do we chat with our neighbors over a communal garden fence? In the foyer and balconies of the theater, do we engage in the off-stage public performance, seeing and being seen? This interaction binds us socially but it is most important in the context of the workplace, where we spend most of our waking hours. Having a nice desk, a comfortable chair, and a decent view makes a difference in many obvious and subtle ways.

From *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and Jacques Tati's *Play Time* in the 1950s and 1960s (see page 6), to *The Matrix* and *Office Space* in the 1990s, parodies of soulless, battery-hen working environments have stayed with us over the years. But attitudes to workplace design have evolved considerably. Today more enlightened employers realize the importance of design in terms of encouraging interaction between individuals and between departments. Of particular interest are efforts to choreograph the interaction that takes place in between the spaces traditionally designed for the conduct of business.

The Current RIBA Royal Gold Medalist, Sir David Chipperfield, once told me that non-functional space was where he found most opportunity to "make architecture." And this is typical of many of the world's

best architects, who seek to exceed their clients' expectations by producing spaces and places that go beyond the original brief.

Developers and project managers sometimes take a narrow view of architecture's role, seeing it primarily as one of measuring and calculating ways to optimize use of the building's space. This is a valid starting point, especially in these days of frugality, but an architecture based on calculation alone will not produce the best outcome. Architects produce their best work when they are creative, artistic, and thinking laterally, making us look at our environment through new eyes. The intangible magic of a place often lies in the spaces in between its functional areas. Just as our streets, parks, and public squares bring coherence and delight to our cities, it is the foyers, entrances and breakout spaces in buildings that connect their occupants with the building's purpose and with each other. It is essential, therefore, that the designers and developers of our workplaces (both private and public) recognize the potential of "the spaces in between."

A building that led the way was **Herman Hertzberger's Centraal Beheer headquarters** in the Dutch city of Apeldoorn. Here, Hertzberger translated the Insurance company's brief into a series of cubic modules that from the outside give the building a ➤

uniformity that belies its subtle and complex interior. Inside, a series of cavernous voids sit between the cubes, creating deep crevasses and tributaries that encourage interaction and dialogue from each of the terraced balconies. Up to 10 people share each terrace and are encouraged to personalize their space with plants and pictures. Likened by many to a workers' village, in this building it is the voids that enable the staff to feel part of a working community without being lost in the crowd.

A few years later, British architect Norman Foster provided a radical alternative to Hertzberger's design when working for insurance company **Willis Faber & Dumas**, a client that demanded large, unbroken floor plates. Foster provided these in abundance behind the full-height "glass curtain" walls that maximize the building's footprint as they trace the site's curvaceous boundary. Similar to Hertzberger, however, Foster carved out a large void at the heart of the plan that extends up through the center of the open-plan offices. A pair of shallow escalators link the ground floor reception with a rooftop café, bringing a sense of ceremony to the process of moving through the space. Not satisfied with this futuristic touch, Foster also proposed two other innovative devices rarely seen in the corporate world at that time: a

swimming pool on the ground floor and a lawn on the roof, both of which have acted as focal points of interaction and communication for the company's 1,200 staff.

Open-plan offices are not always desired, as was the case with the 2005 **Federal Environment Agency building**, in Dessau, central Germany, designed by architects Sauerbruch Hutton. In response to a vast brief for 800 cellular offices of 129 square feet each, the architects chose to arrange the essentially identical offices around a sinuous central courtyard. Their tactic was to subvert the potential for this building to be too repetitive or modular, using the courtyard as the focus for interaction and communication, augmented by additional breakout spaces and link bridges. Thus, when agency staff leave their offices, the landings, balconies, and bridges of the atrium conjoin to create more generous impromptu meeting spaces, encouraging people to stop and talk instead of brushing past each other as they might do in more conventional, narrow corridors. Providing sufficient space for café, library, and auditorium spaces, this free-form courtyard was very much conceived by its designers to be a new type of internal landscape, extending the sort of natural forms typical of its parkland setting. ➤

The Federal Environment Agency building, in the German city of Dessau (right) balances the privacy of 800 individual offices with generous circulation spaces, bridges, landings and breakout spaces. Overlooking a central landscaped courtyard these spaces offer co-workers the chance to meet with each other, improving communication between departments and individuals.

Photograph:
Jan Bitter
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When designing the new Cooper Union building (above) in New York City, Morphosis proposed a large staircase as the principal means of circulation. Understanding the significance of the spaces in between, the stair was conceived as a vertical piazza, promoting connectivity and interaction between three independent schools previously housed in separate, unconnected buildings.

Photograph:
Iwan Baan

By contrast, within the urban cityscape of downtown New York City, the new **Cooper Union building** by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Thom Mayne and his firm Morphosis, creates an internal void of epic scale and character. Described by Mayne as a vertical piazza, and characterized by *The Architect's Newspaper* Editor-in-Chief William Menking as “precipitous, Piranesian,” the six meter-wide, four-storey staircase takes the form of a folded and inclined public square. It rises through the building, encouraging collaboration and dialogue between the three schools at Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art – Architecture, Art, and Engineering – that were previously housed in separate buildings.

Building big and new is not the only alternative, as demonstrated by inventive Tokyo-based Klein Dytham architecture. That firm’s challenge was to find a new site for the recently merged international advertising agency **TBWA\Hakuhodo**, and it surprised the client by proposing a former bowling alley in downtown Shibaura, a district of Tokyo. In demonstrating how the 30-lane bowling hall could be colonized as a 300-person design studio, they used the geometry of the bowling lanes and verges to create a new planning matrix for areas of open-plan desks. Placed between relatively conventional islands of desk space is a series

of self-contained pods that provide quieter meeting rooms and a patchwork of green gardens. These offer a diverse range of communal spaces that can be used for informal meetings, while creating a unique, distinctive and effective setting in which the agency’s staff can produce unique, distinctive, and effective advertising campaigns.

But if scale is what you want, then look no further than Rotterdam-based OMA’s spectacular **CCTV building** in Beijing, China. This derives its unique looping form from the architects’ analysis of the state-owned television company’s organizational and operational structure. Lead architect Ole Scheeren explains:

“The iconic loop acts as the primary organizational tool for all of the building’s systems: form, program, circulation, structure, and services. Two intertwined paths of circulation – the Visitor’s Loop and the Staff Loop – connect all elements of the building. The Visitor’s Loop introduces the public into the usually opaque process of television-making and allows people to view and experience multiple aspects of the production process. The Staff Loop creates a circuit of collective areas of meeting and exchange, while joining all divisions of the company into a single whole. Progressing partly in parallel, unaware of each other’s existence, or sometimes intersecting or overlapping, both loops produce spontaneous as well as planned encounters, and encourage interaction and a method of working that is more collaborative than atomized.”

So, be they large or small, public or private, when companies and other organizations set about building a new headquarters, or simply want to reconfigure their office interior, they should remember to see real value in the spaces in between. While location and image are key considerations in promoting and sustaining a good external image, as long as human beings are involved, internal communication between individuals and departments will always lie at the heart of great businesses. ☺

Rob Gregory is a British architect and Associate Editor of the *Architectural Review* magazine. Spending six years in practice followed by nine years as Senior Editor of the *Review*, his work has been recognised in the A.J. Corus 40 Under 40 award; exhibited in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum and Royal Institute of British Architects; and published internationally. He is Regional Director of architectural practice Levitate, a teaching fellow at the University of Bath and founder of Articulate, a new architectural agency. www.articulatearchitecture.com

Brunswick Arts was set up in 2001 to provide strategic communications advice to arts organizations, corporates, charities and the not-for-profit sector. It operates in Europe, North America, the Middle East and the Far East.



In Beijing, China, CCTV's distinctive looping form (left) reflects two intertwined paths of circulation within the building. These circulation loops connect all elements of the building, enabling visitors to experience the usually opaque process of television-making, and vastly improving communication between staff in collective areas of meeting and exchange, unifying all divisions of the company into a single whole.

Photograph:
Rem Koolhaas and
Ole Scheeren © OMA