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Current Trends in Workplace Organization and Behaviors And their Relevance to 500 New Jersey Avenue

Executive Summary

500 New Jersey Avenue is exactly the right building in exactly the right location. It is located, sited, configured and sized to be perfect for meetings of small numbers of high-level people. A large, multi-national, multi-billion dollar organization can have the optimal presence at the capital of the world -- its own floor in a building with global identity because of its visual link with the US Capitol, with quality windows for everyone -- at a very affordable price.

Background

Blue Chair Design is a major space planning and interior design firm in Washington, DC. We are affiliated with WDG Architecture, a firm that, over the past 40 years, has designed more office buildings in the Washington, DC area than perhaps any other firm.

During the past 20 years, I've worked closely with a variety of clients throughout the Washington DC area and nationally, and I have led the planning and design of over 3 million square feet of space for clients in the District of Columbia itself.

In the last few years particularly, I've done extensive research and writing about the needs and priorities of corporations, associations, technology companies, law and other professional services firms and media groups and how their space needs continue to change in response to the rapid evolution in telecommunications and computer technology.

A prestigious, strategic downtown DC presence is a key piece of a larger puzzle.

My work with various associations, such as the Newspaper Association of America, Associated General Contractors of America and the American Psychiatric Association provides cases in point. All of these organizations chose to locate the bulk of their operations in Virginia, but to maintain a strong presence for their Government Affairs offices downtown, as close to the Hill as possible.

The American Gas Association chose to relocate three years ago from Arlington to DC, taking a floor at 400 North Capitol Street, with prominent views of the Capitol from their main conferencing facility and executive offices, as well as from the comfortably sized open plan workspaces occupied by most of their staff. For the government affairs offices of Philip Morris, RJR Nabisco, General Motors and many others, as well as for news broadcasters like CNN, the need to maintain a physical presence downtown in close proximity to the Hill also continues to be crucial.

Technology changes the way we work.

The most radical change to date for office planning and design is now upon us, as the Internet and new wireless devices make it possible to truly separate "work" from "place." Added to that, fiber optic communications networks are delivering dramatically higher bandwidth (translate that as *faster, higher quality* and also *less expensive*). Video screens are getting larger, thinner in

profile, higher in resolution and less expensive. In conjunction with smaller, more powerful and less expensive computers, we will have increasing ability to separate communication from transportation (Jay Hellman's concept of virtual adjacency®.)

In the near future, (we're talking within 2 or three years here), a billfold size device will house our universal personal telecommunications system – wireless worldwide computer, fax, voice and video teleconferencing, as well as our vital emergency information and medical profiles etc. making virtual adjacency an even more complete reality.

Location is increasingly a flexible, strategic and dynamic decision.

Therefore, more and more people will have choices about where they physically conduct business. As traffic and commuting become increasingly more difficult to navigate in our nation's large metropolitan areas, it begs Jay Hellman's question "if the experience of being someplace isn't worth the effort getting there, and you have an alternative, why go"?

Though we as individuals may no longer *need* to be tethered to a particular location all the time to do our work, our organizations themselves still need to be grounded in physical place in order to have definition, to foster true community by facilitating face-to-face interaction and to provide a powerful, centralized communication platform between the knowledge and ideas characterizing the organization and those it seeks to inform and influence.

Place is Powerful.

Technology has enabled people to work from anywhere, yet the "new economy" is proving to be about *human* relationships and networks that don't require 9 to 5 physical proximity but are certainly strengthened by opportunities for strategic "face time." Technology gives us the ability to *maintain* networks and teaming relationships at long distances, but not to *form* them.

In spite of its ability to provide unprecedented access to information, technology is limited by its inability to be a *source of knowledge*. Pioneering companies, therefore, must connect people of like purposes and interests both virtually *and* physically and nurture their relationships. In order to thrive, companies need to have physical locations that allow thought networks to develop and deepen.

The purpose of the face-to-face meeting is to build a relationship of trust.

Charles Handy, a Fellow of the London Business School, wrote an article published in the Harvard Business Review in 1995 entitled "Trust and the Virtual Organization." He wrote

"An office will be like a club: a place for eating, meeting, and greeting, with rooms reserved for activities, not people."

Place is the physical environment in which ideas are expressed by individuals and advanced through discussion. Knowledge creation results from the continuous interaction between explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is objective, impersonal, and easily expressed as data and specifications. Tacit knowledge is extremely personal and subjective, and thus more difficult to express to others - an intangible, cognitive dimension that arises from our experiences and defines our viewpoint).

Explicit knowledge can easily be shared across space; however tacit knowledge is developed and changed through joint activities rather than through written or verbal instructions.

MIT and Gartner Group research — “Network of Places”

MIT and The Gartner Group are currently involved in an ongoing series of dialogues and forums with a consortium of companies, producing white papers on Workplace Organizational Models and the new “Network of Places” approach to real estate portfolio design and management.

An MIT/ Gartner Group Workplace Forum roundtable on “New Approaches to Real Estate Portfolio Design” highlighted Sun Microsystems (who coined the expression “network of places”), Hewlett Packard, Coca Cola and others who are translating this notion to the portfolio level, building / leasing an array of spaces linked by electronic, spatial and social infrastructures – a bundle of connectivity, occupancy, managerial and internal/external marketing /networking services.

Their findings reinforce the absolute need for inviting, comfortable, flexible and highly responsive workplaces that maximize human collaboration, relationship/ trust building, and knowledge/ idea creation and sharing. All of this is very relevant to the 500 New Jersey Avenue project.

One report addresses current organizational/ technological trends and their impact on the communities and companies servicing the built environment. It includes a four box matrix used to contrast enterprise workplace styles. It suggests that we are moving to four general styles of work, characterized by the degree of mobility and collaboration each setting accommodates:

Siloed

Low mobility, low collaboration (individual centric, place centric and functionally organized, with emphasis on personal effectiveness and performance)

Huddled

Low mobility, high collaboration (individual centric, place centric and community organized, with emphasis on group effectiveness and performance)

Nomadic

High mobility, low collaboration (individual centric, people centric using a “network of places” and functionally organized, with emphasis on personal effectiveness and performance)

Repertory

High mobility, high collaboration (team centric, people centric, using a “network of places” and community organized, with emphasis on group effectiveness and performance)

In terms of the implications for “workscape” environments, these models suggest a broad array of space types that can support both individual and group work. While they might seem to describe job functions (e.g. a sales position as nomadic, an administrative position as siloed and a software developer position as huddled), these are also choices that can be made at the level of the actual tasks and activities (that is, there is some ‘back office’ in all of us part of the time.)

The need for “C” space, i.e. windowless offices, is disappearing.

As computers continue to get smaller, more powerful and cheaper, and video screens larger, flatter, higher resolution and cheaper, and as the bandwidth of the network connecting us increases and gets cheaper, the need for windowless office space, particularly in important locations, is disappearing. Let’s face it, no one likes to work in windowless space.

As Robert Campbell, architecture critic of **The Boston Globe**, says in his recent article, *End of the Line* (prompted by the World Trade Center disaster on September 11th).

“and not everyone, of course, even gets a window. That’s one thing that is sure to change. In most of Europe, it is now the law that every worker must be within about 7 meters (roughly 20 feet) of a window. European skyscrapers... are typically slim and transparent...the opposite of huge, flat boxes in which every floor [at the WTC] was nearly 1 acre in area...America will surely move in the same direction as Europe.”

In many organizations, the ratio of support staff to professional staff has decreased in recent years. Law firms, in particular, reflect this. For example, I have worked with the firm Dyer, Ellis and Joseph (in the Watergate at 600 New Hampshire Avenue) during the last 14 years, doing 2 major renovations and one complete new planning and design. During that time, the firm’s ratio of attorneys to secretarial support staff changed from an average of 1.5 to 1 to 3 to 1, as attorneys utilized computer technology and on line research and information services more and more. Other firms have also significantly reduced library space.

500 New Jersey Avenue, NW applies these findings to Washington, DC perfectly.

The concept of 500 New Jersey Avenue directly and efficiently addresses the needs of certain kinds of organizations for high impact, high quality of life spaces that foster high level, face to face relationship building and idea sharing. It’s location — prominently and prestigiously located at the US Capitol, in close physical proximity to federal institutions and lawmaking bodies, world wide organizations like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, etc — is ideal and not reproducible.

There is no substitute for having the right people shaking hands at the right time. It is the greatest symbol of how important the agenda is that is being discussed. Place plays a critical strategic role for these important meetings.

A full floor, though small, can appear very big.

The floorplate size at 7,800 sf is well suited to single full-floor users like public affairs, government relations or professional services consulting firms. The long narrow shape and freestanding setting of the building provide large windows and abundant natural light on all sides. The highest possible ratio of windowed area to interior space is both highly desirable and rare in this market. Most unique are the strategic views of the US Capitol and the access and inspiration those views convey, which can be experienced from only a very few buildings in the entire world.

This is a very desirable, special and *valuable* property. It’s identity is “America,” not just “Washington.”

Sophisticated interior planning, design and technology/ telecommunications integration approaches to maximize and showcase the unique locational, architectural and telecommunications infrastructure assets of 500 New Jersey Avenue will enable interested organizations to benefit from the singular attributes of this property as part of their larger network of places.

This small, strategic presence will house mission critical functions (legislative, marketing and PR,) raise employee morale (making the firm more competitive,) and save money in other facilities and commuting costs. It is a significant net gain to the select companies that will locate here.

Marilyn S. Burroughs, President
Blue Chair Design
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