

# History of the Office

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Atrium of the Larking Administration Building Frank Lloyd Wright. 1906

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## Origins of the Office

The office has existed in one form or another throughout history as an administrative adjunct to the centralised power of the state. The Palazzo Uffizi in Florence of the Medici or the Bank of England are notable examples.

The first commercial offices appeared in the northern industrial cities of the United States in the late nineteenth Century. With the invention of the telegraph and telephone, offices could be situated away from the home or factory and control could be retained over production and distribution to distant markets. New technologies such as electric lighting, the typewriter and the use of calculating machines allowed large amounts of information to be accumulated and processed faster and more efficiently than before. The concentration of wealth in the new corporations required an ever-greater proportion of an increasingly literate population to work in the 'white collar factories.'

In Chicago, the mid-western hub of the American rail network, technologies such as the steel frame and elevator enabled office buildings to be constructed higher than previously possible to generate maximum income from the site. These were the first speculative office buildings and generally followed the traditional layout of separate rooms opening into corridors. The floor plan would then be stacked to generate the greatest income from the site — this profit-driven logic came to define the skylines of Chicago and New York by the early twentieth century.



The Four Percent office. Bank of England. John Soane. 1818-23

## Traditional Office

Cellular rooms

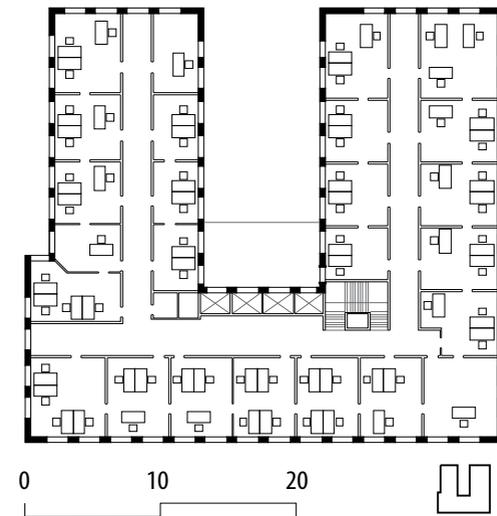
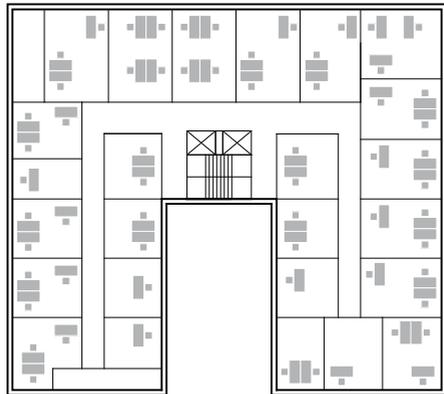
A large floor space that is divided into a number of individual offices by permanent walls. Office sizes may be larger or smaller, depending on the status of the office holder. Top officers in the company usually occupy the corner office, with two window exposures, increased privacy and often much larger square footage.

pros : increased privacy, high level of concentration

cons : rigid hierarchy, low flexibility, lack of colaboration



Jack Conway. The Easiest Way. 1931

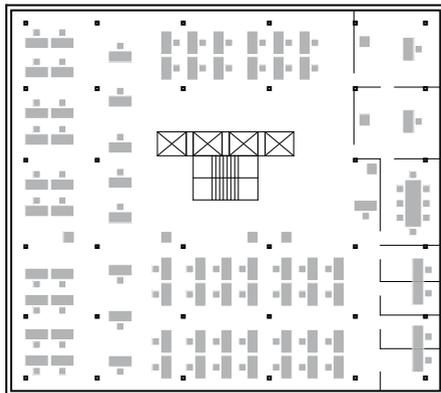


Wainwright Bldg. Louis Sullivan.  
St. Louis. 1890

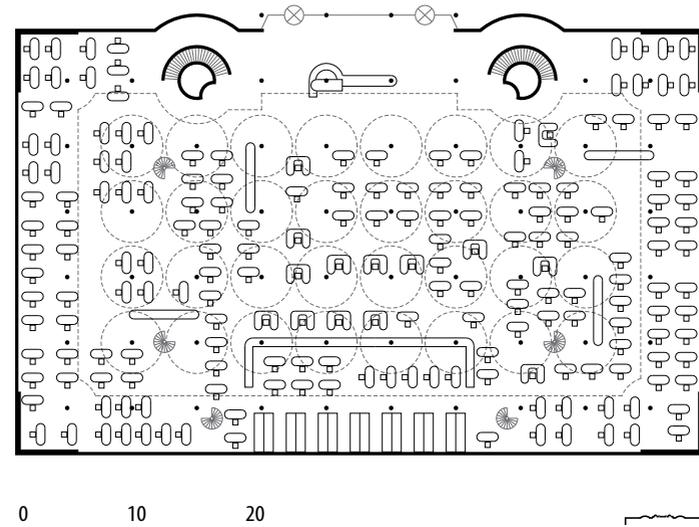
## Taylorist Open Plan

The production-line nature of much office work in the early twentieth century resulted in the work-pool arrangement of clerical workers lined up in rows in large rooms. Mail-order firms, insurance companies and government agencies followed the Taylorist principles<sup>[1]</sup> of splitting tasks into specific repetitive acts. These regimented spaces enabled an uninterrupted flow of work and close visual supervision by managers often having their own offices. The other economic gain derived from such a layout was that more desks could be fitted into open areas than cellular rooms.

pros : increased collaboration, cheap, multi-use environment  
cons : rigid hierarchy, increased noise and lack of privacy



John V. A. Weaver, King Vidor.  
The Crowd. 1928



Johnson Wax Building.  
Frank Lloyd Wright. Racine. 1937

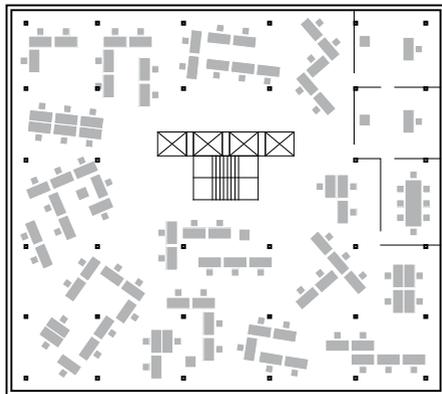
## Bürolandschaft

In the 1950s in Germany the Quickborner team of management consultants developed the radical office layout idea of Bürolandschaft or 'office-landscape'.

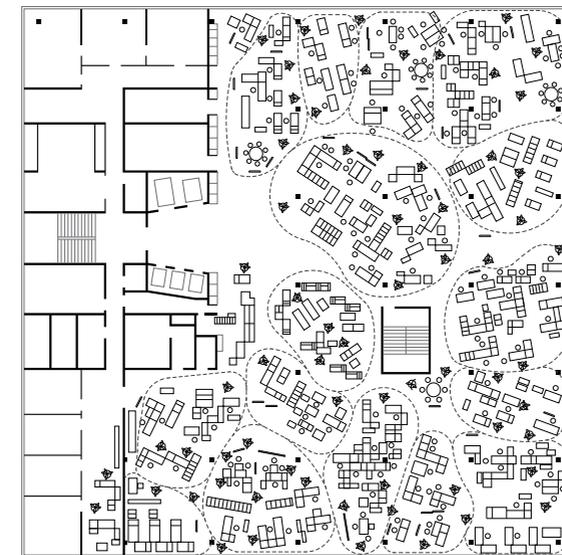
The layout was based upon an intensive study of patterns of communication - between different parts of the organisation, different individuals.<sup>[2]</sup> Desks were clustered in work zones of different sizes. It was intended to provide a more collaborative and human work environment.

pros : non-hierarchical environment that increased communication and collaboration

cons : increased noise and lack of privacy



Billy Wilder. The Apartment. 1960



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Osram Offices. Quickborner. Munich. 1963

## Structuralist Office

The supremacy of the Modernist model of the functional city had started to be criticised and certain designers looked to the patterns and human associations of the traditional city and archetypal forms of other cultures such as the North African Kasbah. The Dutch architect Herman Herzberger developed a kind of structuralist architecture influenced by the ethnic anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Herzberger's Centraal Beheer insurance company project — built in

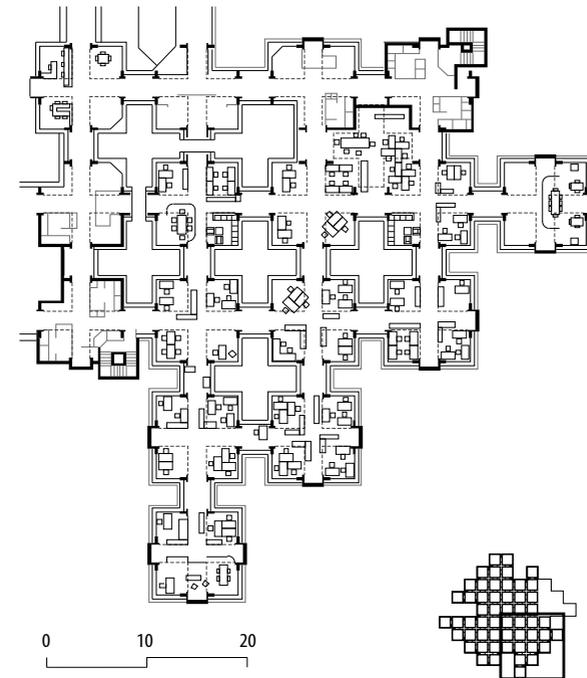
Apeldoorn, Holland in 1974 — is a kind of 'worker's village' designed so that the occupants 'would have the feeling of being part of a working community without being lost in the crowd'. The building is a deep spatial matrix of concrete and blockwork arranged on a tartan grid. Platforms separated by light wells enable light to filter down into the centre of the plan. The unfinished quality of the materials and the repetitive nature of these small platforms allowed them to be appropriated by small groups of 8-10 people who were encouraged to personalise and decorate the space. The company actively encouraged a sense of the family to enter the office and many workers actually brought pieces of furniture and members of their family from home into work.

pros : increased communication and collaboration, identification of employee with the space, homelike work environment, opportunity to personalise working place

cons : labyrinthine quality meant that it was very easy to become lost inside the deep plan



Jacques Tati. Playtime. 1967



Centraal Beheer, Herman Hertzberger,  
Apeldoorn. 1970

## Cubicles

The cubicle is a partially enclosed workspace, separated from neighboring workspaces by partitions that are usually 1.5–1.8 m tall. Its purpose is to isolate office workers from the sights and noises of an open workspace so that they may concentrate without distractions.

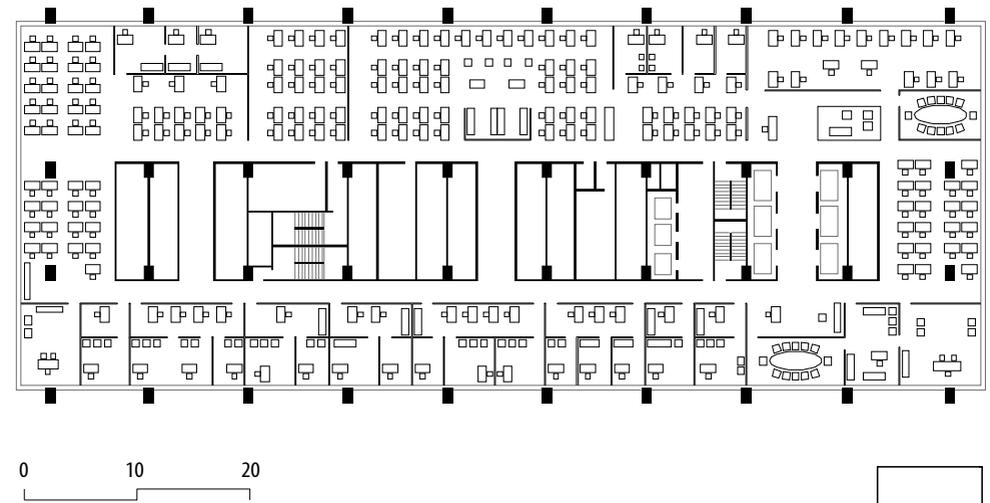
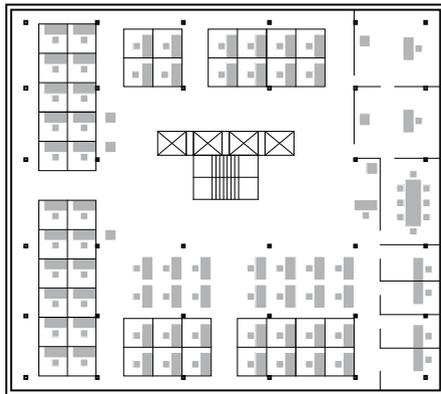
An office filled with cubicles is sometimes called a sea of cubicles or cube farm. Although humorous, the phrase usually has negative connotations. Cube farms are often found in high-tech companies.

The office cubicle was created by designer Robert Propst for Herman Miller, and released in 1967 under the name “Action Office II”. Although cubicles are often seen as being symbolic of work in a modern office setting due to their uniformity and blandness.



Steven Lisberger. Tron. 1982

- pros : relative degree of privacy
- cons : blocks daylight, uniformity of working space



Chase Manhattan Bank, SOM, New York. 1961

## Euro Stakeholder Office

The model that remains dominant today for Continental European offices<sup>[3]</sup>. New office buildings follow the general pattern of narrow buildings of cellular offices arranged along a central corridor.

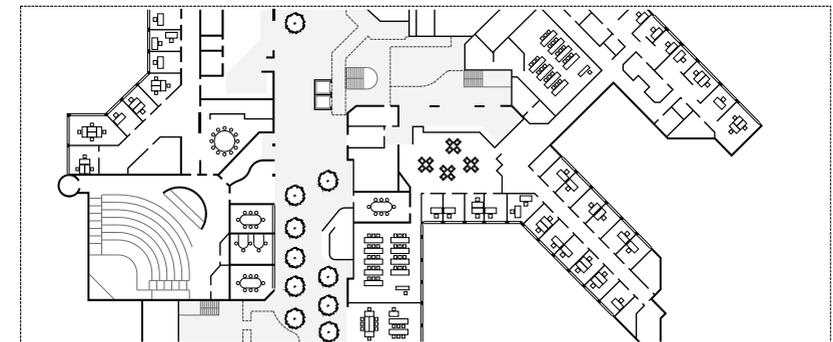
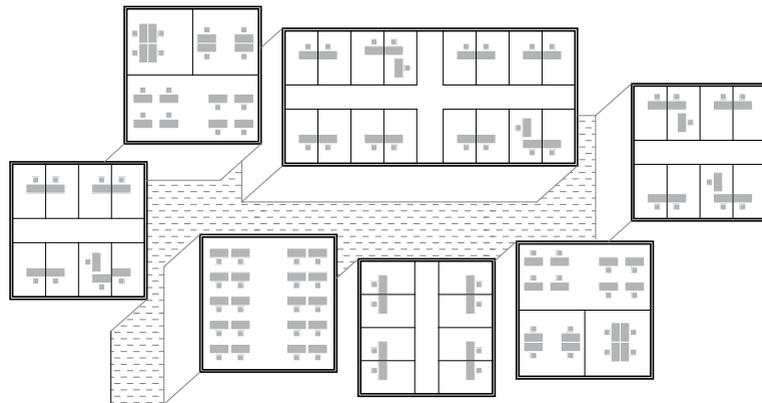
Attempts to create a more public realm in the European office have taken the form of cellular offices with public 'streets' with cafes and relaxation areas such as the Stockholm SAS building by Niels Torp of 1988. The 'combi-office' invented by the Swedish practice Tengbom combines cellular offices on the exterior of a building with a common space for employees and services in the centre.



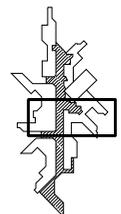
Mike Judge. Office Space. 1999

pros : increased privacy, high level of concentration, more sustainable<sup>[4]</sup> buildings

cons : due to typology many monotonous cellular offices which do not express the culture of their organisations



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SAS offices. Niels Torp. Stockholm. 1988

## Casual Office

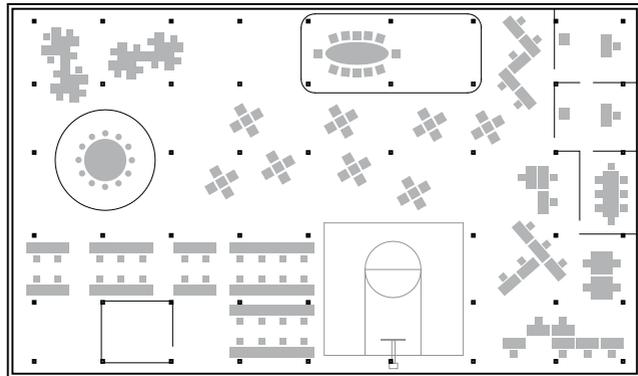
“... at the same, businesses began to recognize that white-collar work was more than pushing paper - it was pushing ideas ...”

Chrysanthe Broikos

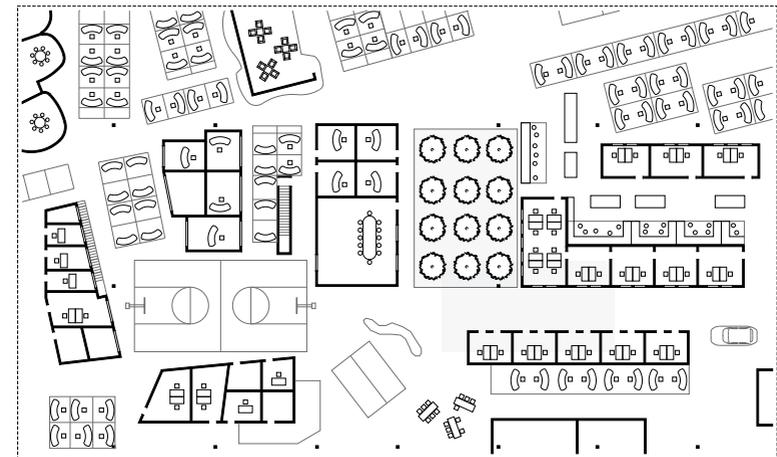
The casual office is pioneered by Silicon Valley software firms in the eighties, which encourages highly personalised workspaces suited to long hours spent programming. The ‘dress code’ of such an office became much more relaxed than a conventional office. As this approach becomes more widespread, especially in creative industries in fashionable central city locations, many have started to become open 24 hours to enable more flexible working patterns. Clearly these offices are the environments where design and creative thinking are developing new ideas that can make the office a more inspiring place.<sup>[5]</sup>

pros : activity based work spaces, flexible working environment

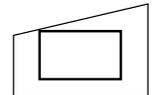
cons : difficult to control the work of employees



Barry Levinson. Disclosure. 1994



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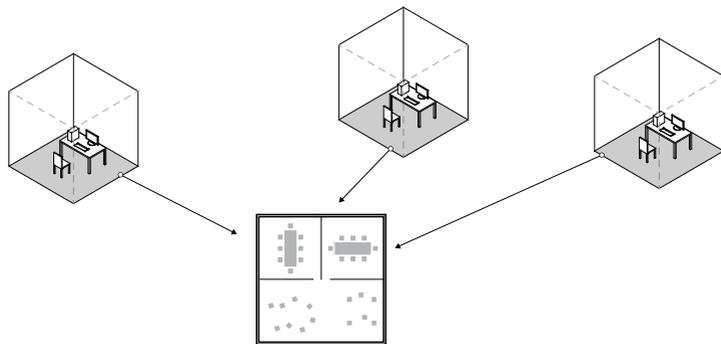
ChiatDay offices. Clive Wilkinson Architects. Los Angeles. 1997

## Virtual Office

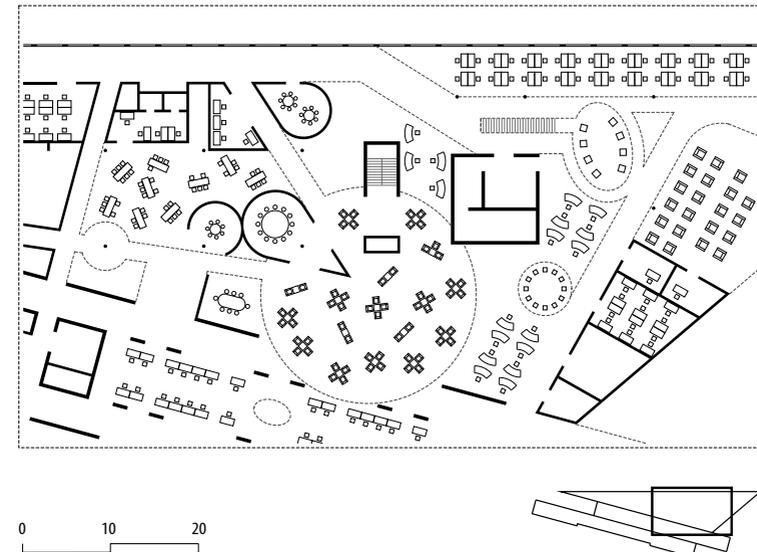
The widespread use of the Internet, laptops and mobile phones has had the greatest effect on recent developments of the office. Work could become more mobile and move from the office to the café or the home. The cost savings of teleworking and outsourcings could not be ignored by companies facing new demands to remain competitive in the globalised markets.

Hot-desking<sup>[6]</sup> and Teleworking<sup>[7]</sup> became constant features of virtual office concept.

pros : reduce rent costs, reduce transportation time and costs  
cons : lack of interaction, decreased productivity, isolation



Graham Linehan. The IT Crowd. 2006-13

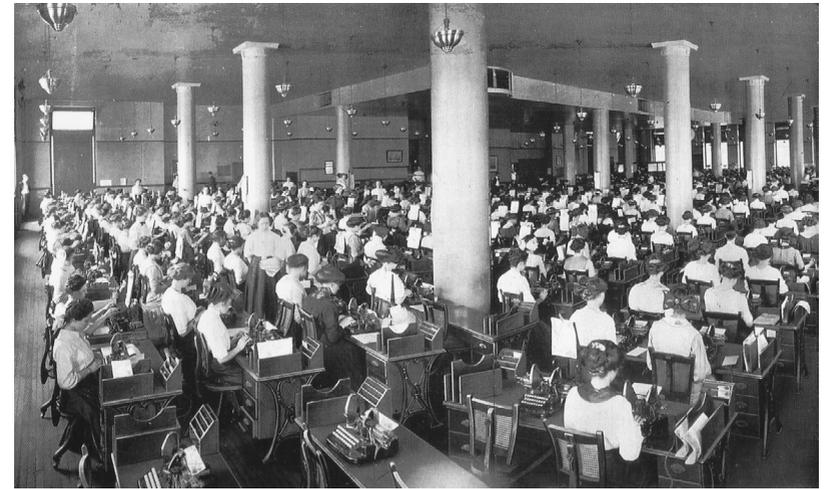
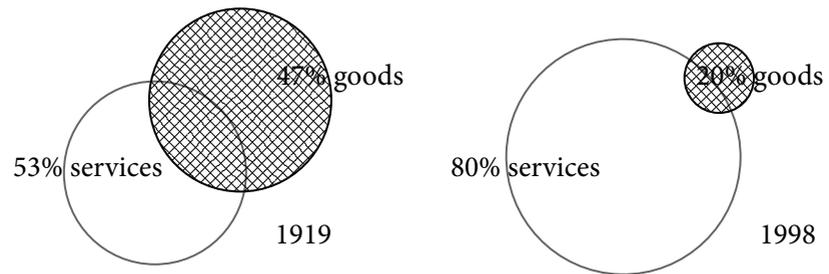


Interpolis HQ. Bonnema Architecten. Tilburg. 1995

## Appendix

### Goods to Services

The economy's shift from goods to services has propelled the rise of the managerial class and the need for offices where they work.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States 1998*



Sears, Roebuck and Company. 1913

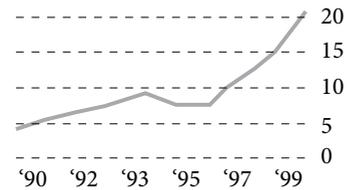


SEI Investments HQ, Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle. 1997

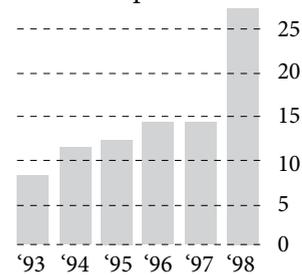
## Home and Office

In the 1990s, the rise of the internet, laptop computers, and telecommuting seemed to signal the demise of the conventional office environment. Some of the country's leading management consulting firms and advertising agencies replaced offices and cubicles with mobile pedestals and telecommunications networks allowing employees to plug in and work virtually anywhere, anytime. As technology allowed decentralization of the working force, corporate headquarters seemed headed for obsolescence.

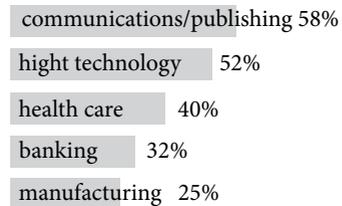
Employees working at home at least one day a month, in millions



Companies with work-at-home option



Companies offering telecommuting in 1997



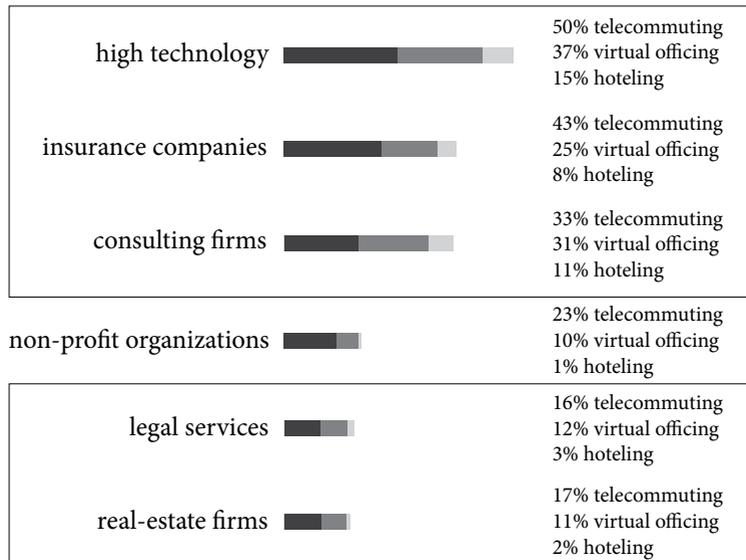
Equitable Assurance Company. 1934



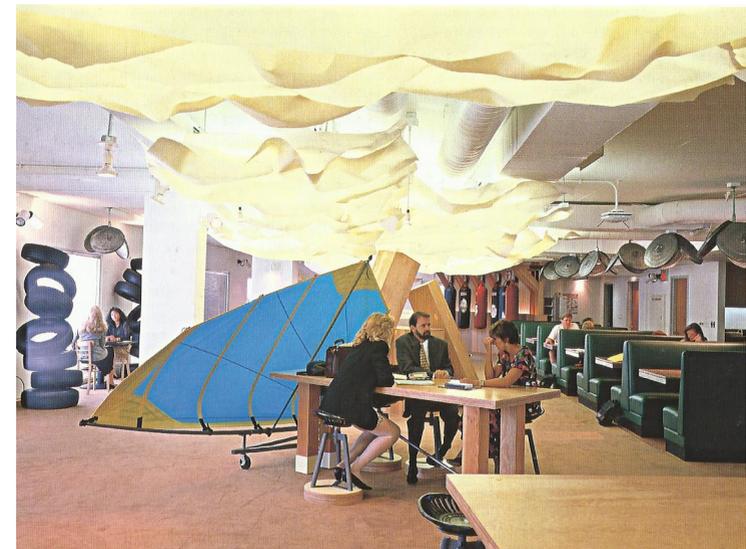
Union Carbide Building. Skidmore. New York. 1960

## Alternative officing

Different types of businesses have adopted “alternative officing” in varying degrees. Source: “What Office Tenants Want” (1999)



Selgas Cano Architecture Office. Iwan Baan. Spain. 2014



Chiat/Day Office. Frank Gehry. Venice, California. 1986.

...An office filled with cubicles is sometimes called a sea of cubicles or cube farm. Although humorous, the phrase usually has negative connotations...



"THE JOB'S PERMANENT...THERE'S ABSOLUTELY NO WAY OUT."



## Footnotes

[1] Taylorist principles:

Scientific management, also called *Taylorism*, is a theory of management that analyzes and synthesizes workflows. Its main objective is improving economic efficiency, especially labor productivity. It was one of the earliest attempts to apply science to the engineering of processes and to management.

A major part of scientific management (Taylorism) is a *time and motion study* (or time-motion study). Is a business efficiency technique combining the Time Study work of Frederick Winslow Taylor with the Motion Study work of Frank and Lillian Gilbreth.

*Time study* is a direct and continuous observation of a task, using a timekeeping device (e.g., decimal minute stopwatch, computer-assisted electronic stopwatch, and videotape camera) to record the time taken to accomplish a task.

*Motion studies* is analysis of work motions, consisting in part of filming the details of a worker's activities and their body posture performing work. The study served the purpose of training workers about the best way to perform their work.

[2] Bürolandschaft :

Derived from organisational theory, the rationale of bürolandschaft was based on a more complex scientific 'model' of 'human relations' rather than Taylorism. For the first time the widely diverse nature of kinds of office work was recognised and the Quickborner team devised criteria for fitting a particular kind of office to a specific type of layout.

The Social Democratic nature of post-war government in many Northern European countries fostered a more egalitarian management approach. The Quickborner team encouraged all ranks of company staff to sit together on one open floor in an attempt to create a non-hierarchical environment that increased communication between people and allowed for future flexibility.

[3] Euro Stakeholder Office:

Countries such as Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands adopted regulations that governed space standards per employee and demanded access to views, daylight and openable windows. Personal control of the environment was seen to be a very important factor in the well being of the worker. As office workers became more enfranchised this control extended to the actual organisation and ownership of companies, many opting to give their employees the opportunity to become stakeholders.

The result of this development is the model that remains dominant today for Continental European offices. New office buildings follow the general pattern of narrow buildings of cellular offices arranged along a central corridor. The result of well meaning but inflexible regulations is that many office environments do not express the culture of their organisations in a positive and integrated way and many monotonous cellular offices are the result.

[4] Sustainability:

A long-term attitude towards development and human activity that aims to cause little or no damage to the natural environment.

[5] Casual office :

Contemporary idea-driven businesses have found that their success depends on collaboration between employees and clients and that their work environment needs to foster that interaction. Such businesses are creating homelike work environment where people can relax, share ideas, and be creative. The new corporate work places of the dot-com economy have kindergarten-like “romp spaces,” coffee bars, gyms, day-care centers, pool tables, and dartboards. Spaces are provided for collaboration as well as private creative thought. Walled cubicles have been replaced by dynamic modular workstations on wheels that can be configured both as shared and private areas. Managers are back in offices, but the offices are in the middle of work areas so they mingle with employees throughout the day. The executive dining room and washroom are relicts of the past. Instead, there are shared coffee bars and kitchens to minimize hierarchy and encourage company-wide interactions. The appeal of the communal office environment has been reinforced by popular culture. Television programs such as Murphy Brown (1988-98), unfolded in the show’s shared newsroom-kitchen.

[6] Hot-desking :

A word coined in the early nineties to describe the practice of working without a dedicated desk. Hot desking is especially suited to work that involves a large proportion of staff being out of an office at one time, desks and facilities are shared and occupied on a temporary basis as and when they are needed. Such a ‘virtual office’ relies on electronic routing of telephone calls and computerised storage of individual files, as well as lockers for personal storage.

[7] Teleworking :

The practice of working from home or from a remote location from the office, enabled by new computer and telecommunications technology. Widely expected to render the traditional office obsolete in the early nineties, generally this has not happened due to the importance of social interaction within most organisations.

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