The Emerging Need for Legibility in Workplace Design

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Workplace Design for Generation Y is Now a Dominant Force

In the past five years or so, we have seen the traditional office—dominated by cubicles lined up in orderly rows—begin to fade away. We are leaving this Baby Boomer era of office design behind and are well on our way into the work world of Generation Y. Part of this change is due to how rapidly technology has untethered us from traditional office space. But change has also been driven by the preferred work style of Generation Y, which is much more collaborative and motivated by the need for social connection. At the office, they demand choice over the location of their work and a variety of options in spaces to use. They prefer diversity and excitement in the look and feel of their workspace. In response, companies are adding an increasing diversity of individual and interactive venues for work, ranging from rooftop gardens, intimate lounge areas, and cafés to game rooms and meditation centers.

This generation intentionally blends their personal and professional personas at work, and thus desires spaces that offer a mix of residential warmth and theme-park excitement. This has led to an office design philosophy that celebrates openness, surprise, variety, and complexity—mixed with a homey vibe—but often results in ambiguity throughout the overall space, and in the intended use of specific work spaces.

The planning approach for the future will need to emphasize the "legibility" of space. Legible offices offer planning configurations that are easy to understand, easy to navigate, and where the spaces' intended uses are clear and obvious.

We Need A "Bigger Idea" in Design to Accommodate the Needs of All Generations

Around the end of this decade, four generations will be sharing the same office environment. The majority will be Generation Y, but significant numbers of Boomers and Gen Xers will also be at work. Generation Z, the kids of Gen Xers—will be entering the professional workforce at this time. In the light of this generational mix, the complex and ambiguous office space focused on Generation Y needs to be reconsidered.

Membership in Generation Z starts with people born in 2000, and the oldest are now in high school. Members of this generation are still being born. This generation will have several defining characteristics: they are being raised to highly value stability, order, and predictability in their lives; they will struggle to manage interpersonal work relationships as adults; and they are almost congenitally distracted. While some may assume this group will simply be an extension of Generation Y, nothing could be further from the truth.

Because of mass layoffs and rampant divorce, many Gen Xers' parents grew up as "latchkey kids" in the recessionary 70s, and later some were labeled "slackers" because entry level office jobs were scarce after college. Today as parents, these Gen Xers are determined not to have their own children relive the chaos they experienced in their early lives. They are raising close families, they value clarity, order and certainty, and they are almost congenitally distracted. They are heroic multi-taskers, glued to their Smartphones and tablets—and guess what? They're terrible at it. So picture them at work in the Generation Y office space, seeking structure, consistency, and order—and refuge from distraction—and instead encountering complexity, ambiguity, and noise and visual chaos. This type of space will play to their weaknesses, not their strengths. The visual confusion and overwhelming choices will simply add to their distraction and make it harder to get their work done.

At the same time, many of the youngest Baby Boomers will still be at work, years away from retirement age. And the older of these "aging in place" workers will have struggles of their own, based on physical challenges such as declining vision, hearing, and mobility. Today, they complain because

the workplace is shifting away from their familiar comfort zone, but in five or ten years' time they may have real complaints. They won't see, hear, or perceive as acutely, and the ambiguous and complex Generation Y workspace around them will aggravate the problem.

Thus, legible office space will take on critical importance for many office workers— especially the youngest and oldest. It should be thought of as a universal design principle for the four-generation office of the future.

Legibility Can Impact Health and Well-being

A workplace that truly supports the well-being of its legible design principles can be applied to all elements of workplace planning, group and individual work spaces, furnishings, and technology. Legible design offers organizations the opportunity to better support the employees of any generation. In fact, research has suggested that good legibility can be a health issue, reducing stress of users, and that should be a criterion for usable habitats for any setting. Poor legibility of floorplan and spaces has been linked to negative health impacts.[1] Legibility is a people-centered approach to design because it puts people's needs first—it is intended to create a positive work experience that makes it easy to locate the type of space needed, and quickly and effectively use each space type.

Legibility can be "designed in" to the office space by offering a floorplan layout that is easy to understand and learn, landmarks that help people orient themselves, visual access within the space and outside to landmarks, and signage that guides people with information about the intention and use of the space.
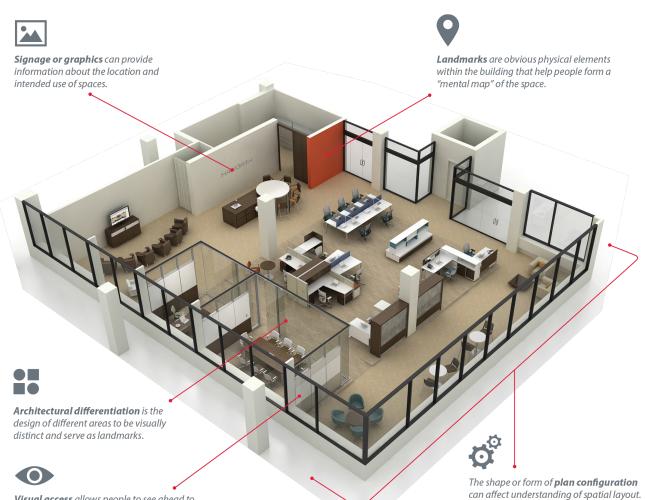
Five Simple Legibility Design Elements

The floorplan layout of a legible office space is clearly organized. People can easily create a "mental map" of the layout and find any location within the building, even with limited experience within the space (Garling and Evans, 1991; Weisman, 1981). In terms of design, the layout of the office should set up a predictable rhythm that makes it easy for people to learn, or easily guess, how to navigate

from one location to another, or where a desired space type might be found.

Conversely, a "cube farm," where the floorplan is laid out with monotonous regularity and every location looks the same, can form a disorienting maze. Complex "illegible" layouts can suppress desirable movement of workers between workspaces, increase wasted time, and reduce overall sense of control in people. If the intended use of a space and its technology is ambiguous (such as café spaces, lounge areas, etc.) people will avoid using them or waste time trying to figure out how to use the space and furnishings.

1. **Landmarks** serve as important physical cues about locations within the building. Landmarks can be outside the facility, such as other buildings or prominent features that can be seen through windows. Significant interior features such as a café, a wall area with a contrasting color or artwork, or other elements can act as landmarks upon which people can anchor themselves in space.

2. **Plan configuration** of the space can affect ease of understanding of space layout. Highly irregular layouts can be confusing, as well as having a high number or density of decision-points (path intersections) within the space.

3. **Visual access** allows people to see ahead to landmarks or other areas for navigation. Having workstations with low horizons, and avoiding architectural elements that may block visual access to the building core, can help to open the space. Visual access outside the space through windows can give people sight lines to elements outside the facility that can act as landmarks for orientation as they move through the space. These landmarks could be manmade or natural features.

4. **Architectural differentiation** is the design of different areas to be visually distinct. These areas can serve as secondary landmarks. This could be as simple as a unified color scheme that identifies an entire department, or a similar look and feel of a large area of space. These areas themselves help people understand their location within the building.

5. **Signage** and graphics can provide information about the location and intended use of spaces, including directions to commonly accessed areas or behavioral expectations.[2]

1 Evans and Cohen, 1987.

2 O'Neill, 1999.

Signage or graphics can provide information about the location and intended use of spaces.

Landmarks are obvious physical elements within the building that help people form a "mental map" of the space.

Architectural differentiation is the design of different areas to be visually distinct and serve as landmarks.

Visual access allows people to see ahead to interior or exterior landmarks for navigation.

The shape or form of **plan configuration** can affect understanding of spatial layout.

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