

Interior of the Royal Atrium, the new STIB/MIVB Headquarters in Brussels. For the workplace and interior design of these news offices, GLOBAL, a subsidiary of ASSAR Architects, applied the 'Dynamic and flexible working environment philosophy creating only 615 workstations for 750 workers. This major rehabilitation of an office building won the MIPIM Award 2010 in the category 'Refurbished Office Buildings'.



The impact of workplace design on vacancy

The most unforeseeable consequences of the explosion in mobile technologies and of high output internet are without doubt those involving space layout and even office space take-up.

The concept of 'dynamic office' which is becoming more commonplace cannot be separated from the most recent information and communications technologies. In fact it is these which make this way of working possible. The 'open plan office' had already paved the way by removing partitions and encouraging working together. The concept of dynamic office goes further: it offers a way of working which makes it possible to alternate between working alone, in teams (themselves of varying sizes), at home, on business trips, on several sites (subsidiaries or rented satellite offices), at home and virtually, through tele-presence. Within this framework, not only do the partitions disappear, but also private offices and even... documents. Scanned upon arrival, the post arrives at its intended recipients in electronic form. The same goes for archives. With no 'personal' papers, no cupboards, the employee has all the information he requires on the screen. The 'clean desk policy' demands that his workstation is emptied and anonymous at the end of every day, because it may be used by someone else the following day, adapted to satisfy the requirements of the moment, either for another work group, or as a place suited to concentration or numerous telephone calls. Wherever he installs himself, the employee's direct telephone number, his e-mail and his archives will follow him, even if he changes building or city! The classic disadvantages of open space are reduced as far as possible. But on the other side of the coin, the 'private corner' which some people require to operate, disappears too. The impact of this way of life and of working has not yet been measured for all personality types.

But for those who can adapt, the office becomes a place to meet and to share knowledge, and not simply a place to work in. It therefore has to respond to specific demands where interior design and equipment are concerned and provide an ideal space for each type of activity...

More vacancy as a consequence?

This concept results in the number of available workstations decreasing, to the point of being fewer than the number of employees. Exceptional planning and a reservation system become a must. According to the latest OCI (Occupancy Cost Index) from AOS, a workstation in Belgium costs € 11,764 per year, so it is easy to imagine the level of cost savings which can be achieved compared to a classic situation where 'one worker = one office'. And especially as some estimates reveal that in the classic format, the number of workstations occupied simultaneously does not exceed 60%, due to employees being absent at meetings, on trips, on holiday or sick.

By reducing the number of workstations, without changing the number of personnel, companies can rationalise their space needs. As it becomes more commonplace, this practice risks decreasing take-up and increasing vacancy. But it is doubtless too early to effectively measure this impact, as other more substantial factors also currently play a role, in particular the economic crisis, which is masking the potential effect of the adoption of dynamic office on the market.

Some notable examples

The new STIB (Brussels public transport company) headquarters

Royal Atrium won a 2010 Mipim Award. Located in the centre of Brussels, the building has undergone major renovation works conceived and carried out by Assar Architects. And the removal of the STIB from this building also provided the occasion to radically transform the workspace by opting for dynamic office. In concrete terms, this translates into three types of workstation (benches, lounges and cocoons), shared and occupied according to need but also involving setting up a 'clean desk' policy. The operating procedures of the facilities services have also been adapted to this new environment and function according to the 'paper-poor' policy,

encouraged by the installation of electronic document management. The process of laying out the interior space followed methodology provided by the Siemens consultants. The first phase, the macro-installation, consisted of estimating the general needs of the services in terms of space and the number of people. In a second phase, a more detailed estimation was established through interviews with the members of the various teams and departments. This functional analysis, which took account of individual needs and levels of presence, enabled the total number and the layout of the workstations to be defined. The third and last phase, that of the micro-installation, involved finalising the furniture layout plans and locations for the various elements within the zones defined during the macro-installation.

Enlargement at Telenet

In Mechelen, Telenet took the opportunity of the enlargement of its site (16,000 m² above and below ground, with parking for 1,100 cars), to try its hand at a new approach to the workplace. Starting with a blank sheet of paper, personnel, unions, directors and specialists together established the plans for a new workplace, which was to serve as a framework for the structure. The exterior thus gradually took shape, as the interior became more defined. The architectural bureau of Poponcini & Lootens managed to evolve the concept which had germinated internally, into a functional and operational complex. Nobody has a determined workstation any more, and the 'clean office' concept is therefore applied everywhere. Employees install themselves in the most suitable place: an individual 'bubble', a round table for group working or perhaps the welcoming coffee corner. This mobility is facilitated by wireless internet connection. Although originally designed for small meetings, the 'talkpoints' can also be used as workstations. The 'benches' or round tables offer all the space required for group working.

Outside of meal times, the cafeteria is transformed into a multi-functional meeting room. Electronic archiving enables the personnel to gain rapid access to information and reduces the need for physical archive space. The project has not only improved the daily life of the staff, but through its well thought out concept, it has also engendered significant savings in operating costs.

Another advantage is the separation between clients and visitors. The meeting rooms are concentrated around the atrium, so that visitors no longer have to go to the interior of the building and risk distracting the workers.

Relaxation areas have been provided: a fitness room, showers, a changing room for cyclists, which encourages employees to come to work by bike.

New work at Concentra

In the Antwerp region, the new building occupied by Concentra (particularly known as being the publishers of the 'Gazet van Antwerpen' newspaper) and which dates from the 70's, has been totally demolished and reconstructed. The working method has undergone the same treatment: employees' job descriptions have been replaced by skills descriptions. Directly linked to this, a 'flex-plek' system has been introduced ('werkplek' means workstation in Dutch), which implies flexibility amongst personnel. The layout of the building has reduced costs through the most efficient possible use of the available space, taking into account the 70 to 80% occupancy levels. The building now enables projects and new services to be organised without any radical modifications in facilities management terms. Each division bears its own responsibility for operating costs. As a result, each has to think about the use of space and increasing the yield per division. The physical archives (cupboards) in the workplace have been reduced by half

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At Telenet, the building concept came from the people who work in it.