

Third Places: The Social Side of Work (Excerpt)

**The following is an excerpt from the Herman Miller Research Summary:
Third Places: The Social Side of Work (©2004).**

“Space affects how we socialize

To create a sense of community at work, organizations are combining attitudinal changes with facility design. They are providing both the coffee bar for people to congregate, for example, and the trust that acknowledges conversations taking place there further the organization’s business goals. Author Martha O’Mara argues that “The allocation and use of space must support interpersonal and social contact. Along with more meeting rooms, bump spaces with couches and tables can be scattered about to encourage impromptu discussions...Some corporate offices now resemble Italian piazzas. Aisles widen into streets with places to stop and talk. Rather than being relegated to a hidden corner or closet, the water cooler and coffee machine now are celebrated in centrally located cafes where people are encouraged to meet each other.”

The f/X Networks office in the Fox Tower in Los Angeles borrows the idea of the small-town post office to bring people together. Rather than have mail delivered or picked up from a traditional mailroom, designers created a central post office where employees go to get mail, take refreshments, and carry on conversations. Waterside, the British Airways headquarters in London, completed in 1998, consists of six buildings arranged along a central covered street where trees and fountains along with a library, café, bank, supermarket, and restaurant draw people to the shared main thoroughfare of the complex. Bridges, glass-walled elevators, and open stairwells give people a view of this public area as they move through the facility.

Creativity in the workplace depends on the social interactions these types of spaces foster. According to researcher Judith Heerwagen, “Playing with ideas, having fun, and brainstorming all contribute to the rapid flow of new ideas that are the building blocks of creativity and innovation. Solitary reflection coupled with intense discussion and debate turns these ideas into useful products and services. The physical setting influences these processes in several ways: first, by affecting the probability of encounters; second, by enabling conversations to develop easily, but without committing people to a long meeting; and third, by providing opportunities for intensive interaction and debate.”

A look at the BusinessWeek/Architectural Record awards for the past few years confirms the emphasis architects and their clients are putting on spaces that allow for the social side of work. These designs embrace a premise that researchers are confirming and many top managers have known intuitively for a long time: Some of the most fruitful and productive encounters in the workplace occur in common spaces.”

For the complete text of this research summary, please CONTACT Thomas Interior Systems.