

The relaxed office: the evolution of the workspace

By Esther de Hollander, WGSN-homebuildlife, 15 October 2012

The 9-to-5 office is one of the past. Today the workplace has evolved, becoming many things - a second home, a place to be productive and inspired, and a recruitment tool for attracting talent.

Companies large and small are embracing new work practices and technologies, changing the demands placed on office design. Wireless networks, video conferencing, and increasingly flexible work schedules are creating much more informal workspaces, where employees are thriving. Those spaces reflect the dynamic, often collaborative cultures in which they operate.



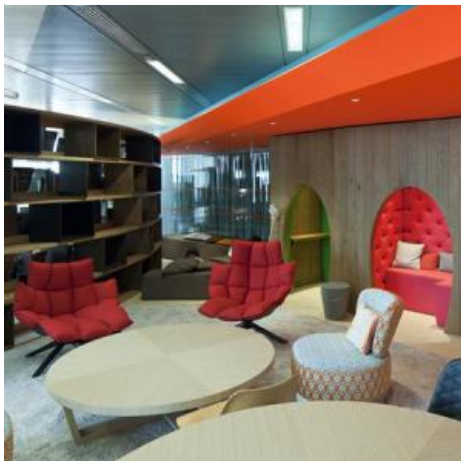
Jung von Matt Office Hamburg

* SHORTCUTS

- **Plush modern:** office design enhancing productivity
- **DIY style:** spaces that look less ready-made and more like a home
- **Social spaces:** office layouts that trigger collaboration and are not based on hierarchy

Plush modern

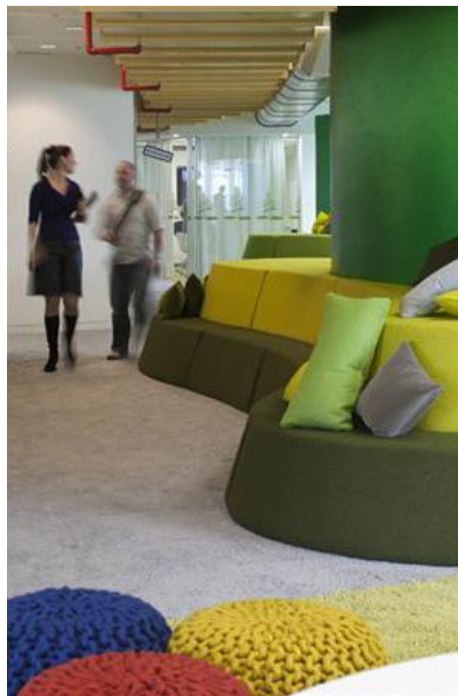
The idea that an active environment should visually motivate isn't new - think schools and gyms - but only recently has it been widely applied to the work place. **Google** became famous for its informal, cleverly designed offices that promote play as much as they do productivity. Likewise, the Stockholm office of **Skype** is filled with colourful chairs and sofas in whimsical shapes that invite inspired conversation. It makes sense when you consider where you'd want to spend more time: in a grey cubicle sitting in a grey plastic chair working over a grey metal desk, or settled comfortably into soft, brightly coloured seating, with your laptop on your legs and a stimulating view.



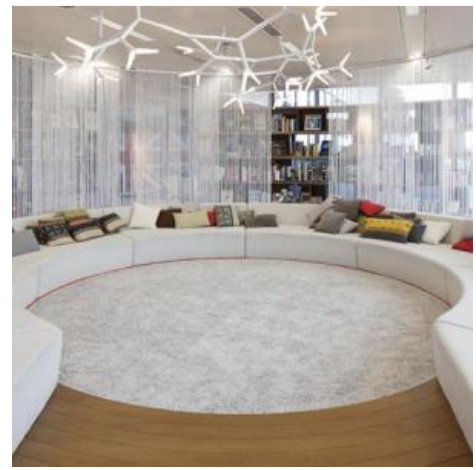
Google Office in London



Google Office in London



Google Office in London



Google Office in London



Google Office in London



Skype Office Stockholm



Skype Office Stockholm

Designers of modern furnishings are starting to respond to the increasing demand for easy-going office furniture that marries the comfort of a lounge with the ergonomics of an office chair - and no one more than Patricia Urquiola. The superstar Spanish designer created her new Hosu seating for [Coalesse](#) specifically for the needs of the modern worker. Low to the ground, it has a bottom cushion that flips down to form a footrest and lots of pockets to hold various devices and supplies, making it perfect for those who do their best thinking while in repose. With the same sort of comfort in mind, her Husk chairs for [B&B Italia](#) offer the support of moulded plastic with the enveloping comfort of deeply quilted cushions.





Husk Chairs by Patricia Urquiola for B&B Italia



Husk Chair by Patricia Urquiola for B&B Italia



Husk Chairs by Patricia Urquiola for B&B Italia

Others are also heeding the call, like Antonio Citterio, who created the Grand Repos for [Vitra](#) so that the angle of the seat follows the movement of the user, and the chair's invisible mechanism adjusts to the user's body weight.



Grand Repos by Antonio Citterio for Vitra



Grand Repos by Antonio Citterio for Vitra



Grand Repos by Antonio Citterio for Vitra

DIY style

It's undeniable that unstructured DIY style - also known as urban-rustic - with its rough-hewn woods and wide-plank floors, has become a part of the design zeitgeist in commercial as well as residential spaces. Everyone from start-ups to powerhouses wants a space that looks raw, perhaps as a way to create a backdrop against which creativity can thrive.

It's a striking change from a decade ago, when many companies wanted to project an aesthetic that was sleek and modern so as to appear cutting-edge. Today, with most people fully immersed in all things digital regardless of where they work, businesses want to turn back the design dial to a simpler time that lends an authentic, accessible air. For example, the new offices of tech giants like Microsoft, DreamHost and AOL all incorporate strong DIY elements into their design, establishing a visceral connection to a time when people built physical things.



Microsoft Office Vienna



Microsoft Office Vienna



DreamHost Office LA



DreamHost Office LA



AOL Office California



AOL Office California

On a smaller scale, the office of Portland-based [Parliament](#), a full-service design studio, was designed by the agency's principal and creative director, Chris Erickson, who used reclaimed lumber from century-old barns and churches and decorated with old-fashioned crates and signage.



Parliament Office Portland



Parliament Office Portland



Parliament Office Portland

Most Architecture was commissioned by Amsterdam-based [BrandBase](#) to design a space for its new office location, which it wanted outfitted with recyclable material. The architects dreamed up a unique

way of using wooden pallets, which not only functioned as a work surface, but as places to sit and sleep. An open-office concept was created to offer the creative advertising agency the easy-going, sustainable environment it sought. In a similarly innovative vein, designers Alrik Koudenburg and Joost van Bleiswijk used 1,600 feet of cardboard and some glue to craft desks, bookshelves, and office partitions for the Amsterdam offices of [Nothing](#), a commercial creative agency.



BrandBase Office Amsterdam



BrandBase Office Amsterdam



BrandBase Office Amsterdam



Nothing Office Amsterdam



Nothing Office Amsterdam



Nothing Office Amsterdam

As a result of the popularity of these informal, DIY-minded workspaces, furniture that fits into this aesthetic - rough, imperfect, industrial - is being made expressly for the office. Philadelphia-based [Lostine](#) has introduced a sparse yet elegant desk made out of reclaimed pine and metal, while for the mainstream market, [Pottery Barn](#) has created a casual wooden desk inspired by a carpenter's work bench, complete with a vice and a hidden three-plug outlet.



Lostine Reclaimed Desk



Hendrix Desk by Pottery Barn



Hendrix Desk by Pottery Barn

Beyond simply using reclaimed wood, another idea for office furniture that fits well into the DIY category is for pieces that appear to be simply stuck together, as in the new Stuck chair by Amsterdam-based [Oato Design Office](#). Mixing elements is another great area for office furniture to explore, such as in the work of Italian designer Marcantonio Raimondi Malerba, who combined the seat of a plastic office chair with the deconstructed frame of a wooden dining chair in his cleverly casual Banana Chair collection for [Anthropologie](#).



Stuck Chair by Oato



Banana Chair by Marcantonio Raimondi Malerba for Anthropologie



Banana Chair by Marcantonio Raimondi Malerba for Anthropologie

Social spaces

Many innovative office spaces today work hard to eschew the dull, monotonous design of the traditional cubicle layout. In the last few years, there has been a move away from these structures towards open floor plans, where collaboration is nurtured via shared spaces and hierarchies are made less oppressive by doing away with private offices.

Instead there are tertiary spaces that aren't conference rooms or personal offices, but in-between areas that can be quiet when focus is necessary, but can also host a brainstorming session. Often these spaces are characterised by being open and comfortable, unstructured yet upholstered; a place where

one or many can plop down to think, strategise and dream.



Square Office San Francisco



Microsoft Office Washington



Facebook Office California



AOL Office California



Jung von Matt Office Hamburg



Jung von Matt Office Hamburg

The built-in felt cubicles in the new Square office in San Francisco were outfitted by local interior design firm [Studio 0+a](#), who has a knack for designing innovative social spaces where people can be languidly comfortable while being wildly productive. In addition to the cubicle pods, it has also installed soft open-plan seating in the offices of Microsoft, Facebook and AOL.

In extending the offices of Hamburg-based agency Jung von Matt, designers at [Stephen Williams Associates](#) set picnic-like informal break areas directly into the walls as a way to encourage informal conversation while creating an intimate atmosphere.

This new approach to office layouts suits a new kind of employee known as a 'free-desker', who either travels frequently or doesn't want a permanent workspace, opting instead to take whatever is available within proximity of their teams.