

SYSTEMS FURNITURE Gain insight into the fate of one of the most talked-about furniture system components from the perspective of a furniture designer

The Cubicle as Foe ... and Friend

By James Ludwig

Today's culture, particularly in the United States, often loathes and mocks the office cubicle.

In fact, cubicles have become cultural icons for everything we despise about our work life. As a designer, it's impossible not to hear those complaints and take them to heart. We hear:

- "Cubicles are like cages; they make us feel trapped and uninspired."
- "Cubicles cannot support new and existing technology, or the way I work."
- "Cubicles are not a place to meet, and you can't share them."
- "Cubicles do not support teams or collaboration."
- "Cubicles are not comfortable and certainly are not relaxing."

This is just a snapshot of what anyone in the furniture industry hears day in and day out from people working in the cube. Even I, a furniture designer, have pronounced the cubicle, as we know it, dead – or at least a dying breed.

Yet, despite the negative criticism, there are redeeming qualities to the cubicle – or at least the principles that drove its invention. It certainly revolutionized space planning and made the process much more convenient for facility managers. It helped countless organizations reduce costs and increase space utilization. In some cases, it even deflated the hierarchy within an organization and leveled the playing field within the workplace. But, let's face it: The cubicle, or "I" space, is outdated and in desperate need of rethinking.

So, when asked about the future of the cubicle, two issues come to mind: change in social behavior and change in technology.

Traditionally, and for the foreseeable future, the cubicle is

(and will be) a unit for one. But, in today's global environment, business problems are such that one mind is not enough. Therefore, even when an organization is planning for one, the cubicle needs to be flexible enough for "eyes-to-eyes" communication as well as "eyes-to-information" sharing. Add to that the influx of new media and access to massive amounts of real-time information through technology, and there is a need for spaces that allow users to sort and access a ceaseless torrent of data.

What it comes down to is that everything in and about the cubicle is meaningful and requires careful consideration. No detail is too small to have an impact on the quality of the space and on the experience of the user. In reality, the future is not that far off.

Give Cubes a Chance

Looking at where we are today, as well as at the social and technological themes that drive where we are heading, is critical when pondering the future of work and the place the cube holds in it. Its current appearance and function are really only the result of what we, the industry, have asked it to be. It can be more. And, it must evolve to ensure that organizations are able to advance and meet their business goals and objectives. Let's revisit some of those common cube complaints and explore the possibilities ...

"Cubicles are like cages; they make us feel trapped and uninspired." When your back is to the aisle and you're sur-

rounded by panels, it's easy for individuals to feel trapped and surprised by approaching guests. Alleviate that angst by adding a window panel and making it possible for users to move their backs away from the aisle with a worksurface that allows them to change positions. Then they can face collaborators and put an end to the "data insecurity" of the exposed screen.

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the way I work.” Traditionally, the cubicle space was designed to support a desktop computer (with a huge CRT) and other fixed technologies. With the introduction of flat screens, projection screens, and mobile devices, this is no longer a requirement. The design of tomorrow’s cube – or even today’s – does not have to focus on any specific technology; rather, it can support any of the technologies that are making (and will make) work life more flexible and accessible.

Additionally, the paperless office is not the reality it promised to be. Surprisingly, only 6 percent of workers responding to a 2005 Workplace Index Survey noted that they store all of their information electronically, compared to 44 percent in 1998. In fact, people feel that they need more storage and that the cube is not the place to find it (the reason is because most people are “pilfers” and, once the worksurface fills up, they have nowhere else to go). By layering storage and worksurfaces, it is possible to leverage vertical space and create more surfaces for piles.

“Cubicles are not a place to meet, and you can’t share them.” Not so. By adding bench seating and standing-height platforms that double as storage, the user can stand up for a quick meeting or have a casual seat for a more in-depth conversation.

It’s even possible to take an 8- by 8-foot space and split it for two. Raised worksurfaces and storage make the space feel much larger than it really is. Let the floor plane stay visible and blur the lines of territory. Collaboration spaces for six in an 8- by 8-foot space can be planned as a sort of “Café de Cube” to create technology-savvy “we” spaces.

“Cubicles do not support teams or collaboration.” Steelcase research shows that nearly 90 percent of office workers typically work alone or in groups of two. By sharing a space separated by surface and storage, a team of two can work together. Add in a wall of shelving and the space doubles as a library for the team’s joint reference materials.

If collaboration is an issue, organizations can tear down the walls that act as barriers and still stay within the same footprint. More open space and surfaces for collaboration encourage communication and create an environment where ideas flow freely. In fact, decisions are made quicker and tend to have deeper impact when two people come together.

“Cubicles are not comfortable and certainly are not relaxing.” If ever a myth needed debunking, this is at the top of the list.

Most organizations experience periods when a cubicle is empty for any given amount of time. Why not use that space? Adding in a large worksurface and two benches, as well as a flat-screen monitor, can create a small meeting place for a team to sit down and relax while working on a presentation or other joint project. In fact, the creative team at a world-class advertising firm jumped at the chance to add a “Studio 54” feeling to their vacant cubicles (they created an 8- by 8- by 8-foot, red-velvet-lined, pure white cube full of soft seating).

Alternately, an empty space can easily transform to a library space designed for concentration, studying, socializing, and gathering information. Full-wall storage shelves, guest seating,

and low tables can create the perfect space within the boundaries of a cubicle. For facilities professionals who can rethink the traditional



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cubicle, it can become a space that inspires, relaxes, engages, and supports the ways people work today and for years to come.

Beauty that’s Not Skin Deep

As we look to the future, it is not just the cubicle that will continue to change, but the contents that go into making it. As much as we consider the aesthetic look and feel of our physical space, products shouldn’t just exhibit beauty on the outside – the inside counts, too (maybe even more).

We live in a world of increased knowledge, where access to information is ubiquitous and consumers are “reading the labels” to determine what is in the products they purchase. As individuals become more educated on issues of sustainability, they drive positive change, including the enforcement of stricter environmental guidelines when the time comes to purchase products.

Both the worker and the company they work for want to know what they are exposed to when they sit in a cubicle for 8 or more hours a day. As facility planners, architects, and designers, we are bound by a social contract; future iterations of the cubicle must respond with a sense of responsibility.

Designing the cubicle for sustainability is particularly exciting because it forces everyone to acknowledge that design can be a tool for social and environmental improvement.

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To inspire creativity, transform vacant cubicles into unique places to lounge and visit.

We are responsible for ensuring that there are good, healthy materials that make up the space, not just “less-bad” ones.

Designing the cubicle for sustainability is particularly exciting because it forces everyone to acknowledge that design can be a tool for social and environmental improvement. While it will take some time before we live in a truly

green world, the furniture industry has made great strides to embrace sustainability.

For example, there is an increased emphasis on life-cycle assessments, Cradle to Cradle™ design philosophy, and product certifications. The goal of the Cradle to Cradle process is to track a product’s life from start to finish, starting with the use of materials that are safe for human and environmental health, and ending with the easy recovery and reuse of product materials.

One of the major hurdles facing the office furniture and facilities industries is the elimination of PVC in products. This has been a challenge, but it can be overcome. A full material assessment helps identify gaps in a product’s sustainability by analyzing both the human and ecological health impacts of a material’s ingredients, as well as the ability to recycle or safely compost that material.

Some manufacturers are even creating options for organizations to recycle or reuse office furniture at the end of their useful lives: Possibilities include reselling, refurbishing, donating, or recycling. Manufacturers and dealers can also help customers extend the useful life of their furniture through refurbishing the furniture, by facilitating the sale or donation to another organization that can still use the furniture, or by helping customers have the furniture recycled, with the goal of minimizing the amount put in a landfill. It also helps when products can easily be recycled by the organization. Products designed with simplicity in mind and that are easy to take apart with common hand tools also increase the likelihood of recycling.

As more manufacturers commit to eliminating PVCs, identifying viable material options for sustainable design, and creating ways to reuse and recycle older products and expanding those efforts globally, their impact will continue to grow not only in regards to the future of the cubicle, but also in regards to future generations. ■

James Ludwig is director of design at Grand Rapids, MI-based Steelcase North America (www.steelcase.com).