dialogue

Talking about...
The Changing Nature of Work
Workplace Revolution 2.0
Startups and Post-Startups
Reinventing the Headquarters
Susan Cain and Sherry Turkle

A Gensler publication
We should be designing work settings where there’s an ability to pick and choose how much stimulation you want, at any given time. Being able to shape your own space is hugely important.

Susan Cain, author of the New York Times best seller Quiet

“A revolution in personal empowerment is under way,” the Wall Street Journal proclaimed. “In the marketplace, the largest and most durable opportunities are those based on freedom.” The topic was retailing, but it could just as well have been the office workplace. The first workplace revolution got us to the point where people can choose among a range of work settings to orchestrate their workdays. The second workplace revolution takes this further, responding to a mostly millennial workforce. Open-ended and experiential, the latest work settings encourage people to shape them as they use them. The aim is to engage and empower, channeling all that personal energy into the business at hand.
The modern workplace has its roots in the technological revolution that ushered in mobility circa 1990. For more than 20 years, organizations have exploited innovations in networks, computing, and communication to boost productivity and drive down costs. Parallel gains on the building side have made for healthier, more sustainable work settings. The need to support innovation has produced flatter organizations and open, fluid, flexible work settings. Nirvana?

Not quite. Conversations with the Gensler workplace practice point to deficits, dilemmas, and untapped opportunities. There’s a sense of urgency and excitement among these designers as they talk about their work—urgency because the problems they’re solving are crucial to clients, and excitement because the paradigm is shifting as important questions about the workplace are being answered. To capture the flavor of this discourse, let’s look at six questions that came up the most.

Why the renewed focus on focus?

A key finding of Gensler’s Workplace Performance Index (WPI) surveys of US office workers is that while collaboration is hugely important, the ability to focus is even more so. It’s not that people are collaborating less, but rather that they’re distracted more. The core WPI finding is that the inability to focus undermines performance in a broader sense. The implication: focus is fundamental. This flies in the face of the open, densely populated workplace that’s considered basic to supporting the informal interaction that spurs innovation. Will cubicles and private offices soon make a comeback, despite their documented lack of utilization? “It’s about finding the right mix,” says Gensler’s Janet Pogue. “Most people’s work styles vary, even over the course of a day. You can...

Workplace Revolution 2.0

BY ALLISON ARIEFF

The workplace is ripe for reinvention.

As the millennial generation comes into its own in the workforce, the expectations for the workplace are changing. Here’s a report from the field on where it’s headed next.

It’s not that people are collaborating less, but rather that they’re distracted more. The core WPI finding is that the inability to focus undermines performance in a broader sense. The implication: focus is fundamental. This flies in the face of the open, densely populated workplace that’s considered basic to supporting the informal interaction that spurs innovation. Will cubicles and private offices soon make a comeback, despite their documented lack of utilization? “It’s about finding the right mix,” says Gensler’s Janet Pogue. “Most people’s work styles vary, even over the course of a day. You can...
design spaces for varied activities without sacrificing openness or density.”

Facebook opted to go beyond open plan. With Gensler, it developed a deliberately un-designed headquarters workspace that reflects its flat organization. Not even the CEO has a private office—everyone gets what amounts to a blank canvas and is asked to create an environment that suits. Desks are customizable and height-adjustable, and there’s a choice of chairs. That the workspace would be largely open was a given, says Gensler’s Randy Howder. “The real issue was how to support different levels of privacy. We used screens, movable and otherwise, to modulate the open collaboration spaces.”

The advertising agency 22squared took a different tack, rebalancing the workspace in favor of more “we-space,” as Gensler’s Richard Macri calls it. “Working anytime and anywhere is the norm now, so we provided a variety of shared spaces that support work-mode choices.” By pairing them with a slightly denser workspace overall, 22squared kept its costs in line.

Furniture plays an important role in creating spaces for focus or collaboration, Macri says. “You need furniture that’s comfortable and varied. The move to smart devices means that workstations, in particular, can move away from the [knowledge worker’s] standard.” The new mix provides openness, but also inserts areas in its midst where people can work without distraction.

Can design really help spark innovation? The answer is yes, but not as conventional wisdom suggests. In abandoning the old office paradigm of rows, columns, cubicles, and linear thinking, “there was a tendency to go with edginess for its own sake,” says Gensler’s Mandy Graham. To understand better how workplace design really supports innovation, she and her team began a dialogue with a cross section of innovators.

Take 3M, a company known for its systematic commitment to invention. “There’s a rigorous process to support it,” Graham says. “The rhythm of that process is built into the workplace. It’s both a platform and a creative tool, making it safe for people to

right: 22squared in Atlanta is designed to let different kinds of work occur without creating distraction.
Can change management change?

Workplace change management “uses frequent advice and both practical and inspirational communication to take people from one reality to another,” says Gensler’s Johnathan Sandler. What is changing can run the gamut from minor to major, but engagement is key, his New York colleague Amanda Ramos stresses. Change management is traditionally imposed on people. Today, though, Gensler is leveraging social media to shift the frame from top-down to something that is more two-way and grassroots. “We call it change networking. When things are in flux, the fears that arise are best countered through active discussion,” Ramos says. “Social media makes that easier because the people who are affected by the changes can drive the conversation.”

take risks.” Or consider Whole Foods. Right off the lobby of its new headquarters is a residential-style kitchen—a constant reminder of who benefits from the company’s innovations. Sporting goods maker Wilson also re-created a retail setting in its headquarters to help accelerate the product-development cycle by immersing its designers in the real world of their customers and end-users.

A Gensler research team in San Francisco led by Lisa Bottom is asking how pervasive computing and digitally “alive” materials—applied to windows, walls, and tables, for example—could change the way the workplace supports creative work. “The technology isn’t there yet,” she says, “but we need to anticipate how to incorporate it.”

70% of the US workforce is either not engaged or actively disengaged at work, according to a 2012 Gallup poll. This is why progressive workplace design emphasizes individual as well as team performance.
Another approach is to use pilot programs, as American Express did with its BlueWork initiative. A pilot in New York let the company test and refine ideas, and then apply the results. “It can be very challenging to get people to buy into new ideas. With a pilot program, you can address their issues directly, along with the organization’s readiness and capacity to change,” Sandler says.

How do you bridge global and local?

Locational differences are partly about work style and partly about identity. The BlueWork program set out to address both, Sandler explains. Based on four predominant work styles across American Express, it gives the company’s offices and business units the leeway to tailor each work setting to reflect local preferences and reinforce team identity. Yet it supports the American Express brand through overall look-and-feel and performance. It also meets the company’s real estate cost and space utilization targets—in 41 different countries.

Can a workplace make people healthier?

The desire for healthy work settings dates back to concerns about indoor air quality in the 1980s. Most of the focus since then has been on environmentally benign design and, in some cases, access to fitness centers. Meanwhile, our sedentary ways have been fingered as a contributor to poor health. There’s a real cost to employers in lost productivity and higher insurance premiums: $80 million per year in the US alone, according to McKinsey. Yet, as the Mayo Clinic reports, just standing more and sitting less can help office workers shed considerable amounts of weight.

“Wellness is becoming a priority in the workplace,” says Gensler’s Janine Intonato. Bayer Healthcare, for example, is taking a holistic approach to wellness in its new Whippany, NJ, campus. Among its features are adjustable, sit-to-stand desks for each of its 2,500 on-site employees, healthy menu choices and nutritional snacks, indoor and outdoor walking trails, a stand-alone fitness center, and bike parking and showers. “Even the stairs are designed to encourage people to skip the elevators,” Intonato says. The campus will include a medical suite with three exam rooms, a lab, a nurse, and a part-time doctor. There will also be two mothers’ suites, each with three nursing rooms. While wellness aligns with Bayer...
Why ‘workplace enablement’?

Susan Chapman: It comes down to people. Alternative workplace environments usually come from a place of saving money. Part of the answer has to be around expense management, but rather than thinking about it as just reducing expenses, we can also focus on having the right amount of the right kind of space—space we can utilize to its maximum potential. Our business units look to us to help them make more money. We’re demonstrating that they will do better when their people are involved and excited about making the workplace work for them.

What led Amex to BlueWork?

SC: American Express is growing and the business is changing as we grow. We’re becoming more of a digital company so we need the speed that comes with that. Our projects have shorter life cycles and we need to innovate faster. It’s the right moment for it—the company is looking for new ways to work. Some companies have struck their head offices dramatically, while others have moved along the way, they will tend to revert back to what’s comfortable. The changes can’t come as a surprise.

What role does technology play?

SC: Technology drives workplace flexibility. We plan every BlueWork project with our tech team at the table, because the end-user experience is so important. If people decide to work from home and the technology doesn’t work, they are going to be frustrated. We also have to deal with hardware and software defects as they come up. Getting people from being stuck in their magic isn’t easy, but they’re happier when they know that it is a problem, it will be solved.

Technology has become a strategic competency that drives revenue growth. It’s not just about enabling productivity. Companies like ours spend more on tech now, but we also spend more on the workplace. That’s because we’re competing for tech talent, especially in places like Boston, New York, and Silicon Valley. If you’re not a startup offering stock options, you have to think how you’re going to attract the talent you need. The workplace can be a differentiator.

Are startups a benchmark for Amex?

SC: American Express isn’t a startup. Our work settings may reflect some aspects of the startup culture, but they’re designed in direct response to our brand and our business needs. Startup offices are usually open plan because it’s less expensive. Also, when you’re in startup mode, collaboration is the name of the game. You don’t want anyone behind closed doors. One of our industry peers is in the process of implementing an entirely open-plan workplace. That’s not us. Enabling our people means recognizing their different work styles. BlueWork provides a mix of offices, open plan, drop-down areas, conference rooms, and other settings. It’s designed to support the life cycle of each person’s experience. An all-open-plan workplace can’t do that.


People Are the Core

KEY FACTS AND INSIGHTS

1. Aligning work styles with flexible work settings and giving people choices are key to supporting them cost-effectively on a global basis.

2. Technology is critical to people’s workplace experience. Workplace drives revenue growth. It’s not just about enabling productivity.

Healthcare’s brand, others are not as familiar with it. Introspective notes. She paints them to the idea, “It clearly shows that a healthy workplace is a great investment for our country. It boosts morale and increases workplace productivity.”

The staircase has emerged as a key part of the wellness strategy, says Gensler’s Cindy Coleman. “We design the staircase to be ‘loosely programmed’ with amenities, so people want to use them, but not just to get from floor to floor.” An activated staircase may have a coffee bar near a mid-point landing, or serve as a casual meeting place, with the stops designed to double as bleacher-style seating.

Reimagining the stair is an aspect of what American Express’ building calls “active design.” It’s a source of points that count toward LEED certification, says Gensler’s Christina Crespo. “The staircase is part of the broader strategy of introducing ‘intentional inefficiency’ into the workplace.”

The idea is to get people to walk more—by locating printers or recycling bins at a greater distance from their desks, for example. Other measures include converting walking meetings that take place outside and subsidizing bike commuting.

In Washington, DC, Gensler is applying active design to itself. An award-winning Action Design Week created awareness of the issue with an activity zone for everything from jump-jacks to disco dancing, fitness classes at the end of every workplace, and recommendations for nearby eateries with healthy food options. “We followed up with weekly yoga and sports classes,” says Crespo. “Several clients have picked up the program in their own workplace.”

Does a headquarters still make sense?

Between a mobile workforce and the often-global reach of many organizations, the role of the headquarters is in flux. Some companies have shrinked their head offices dramatically, while others have moved them—and even multiplied them—to be closer to their markets. For Amgen, one of the world’s leading biotechnology companies, global expansion made the “back to the future” notion of having a one-card center appealing. Amgen also saw the value of its headquarters as a platform for transformation.

“Is this a wider trend,” says Gensler’s Philip Toole. “In Europe, for example, there are two megatrends happening simultaneously: a growing number of companies are reclaiming the headquarters as the home base and social nexus of their brand, culture, and a number of them are returning to the city center to have access to talent.” For both, “the headquarters are the first-choice place to work for people and teams, despite an abundance of other choices,” Toole adds. When Amgen first thought about its headquarters, capacity was the issue. The company believed that the headquarter campus could be redesigned to accommodate more people at less cost, and, more important, support the data. “It clearly shows that a healthy workplace is a great investment for our country. It boosts morale and increases workplace productivity.”
Amenity goes hand-in-hand with informal gathering and conversation at Edelman’s London office.

new work styles in the context of a global company, operating 24/7.

“Synergy is a big issue for Amgen,” says Gensler’s Barbara Bouza. “The need for it drove the design.” She and her team developed a pilot project to move the global headquarters workspace toward a more fluid model with different levels of openness and flexibility. A sophisticated rezoning strategy supports both on-the-fly collaboration as well as focus work. Within Amgen’s culture, people have much more latitude today about how, when, and where they work—on their own and with their campus colleagues and global peers. What the pilot project gives them is a work environment that lets them fully leverage this flexibility.

“The broader trend is that people expect to be treated as individuals,” says Gensler’s Diane Hoskins. “They bring more of what used to be considered ‘outside life’ to the workplace.” The millennial generation is more explicit about this, but it shares with older peers a preference for working in an open-ended way. This is why even companies that are “very metrics-driven,” as Bouza describes Amgen, are equally committed now with the intangibles, the qualities that they can’t measure as easily but are recognizably no less important.

The metrics aren’t going away. “This isn’t about reviving the private office,” Hoskins says. “It’s about giving each person the ability to navigate the workplace and orchestrate the workplace to suit changing needs. If it’s designed well, the metrics will be just fine.” Providing choice and flexibility serves larger goals like supporting community and hitting sustainability targets. “The work settings that result may look radically different, but they share an underlying logic.”

Allison Arieff edits SPUR’s magazine, The Urbanist, and writes on design and society for Wired and many other publications.
PNC Financial Services Group, Inc. has an outsized impact, with a real estate portfolio that ranges from bank branches to office and mixed-use towers. As Gary Saulson notes, sustainability has been a PNC priority since 1998. Saulson, an EVP and director of corporate real estate, is leading the company’s latest and greatest venture into sustainable design—its new headquarters in downtown Pittsburgh, The Tower at PNC Plaza.

“Towering over a 10-year period. The company’s already lowered its energy costs by 30 percent. Two and half years ago, PNC committed to lowering its energy costs by 10 percent over a 10-year period. The company’s already almost halfway there, Saulson notes, and the tower’s lead designer. Considering the building’s location in Pittsburgh, where winters are harsh and summers are hot and humid, that was a starting revelation.

Making this work takes a unique window—a high-performance system of operable panels that are controlled by an automated system. Under ideal weather conditions—what Ko calls a “net-zero day”—large air gates on the exterior open automatically, signaling that the tower is breathing. When the gates open, air will fill a vented cavity and sliding panels can be opened by buildings occupants to access fresh air.

Air will flow into the building with the aid of an additional design feature: a solar chimney. In a conventional highrise, an open window would cause air to be pushed out of the building by the positive air pressure inside. Opening a window in the PNC tower, however, will draw air into the building. People inside will quickly feel a pleasant change in air temperature.

“It’s like a breathing machine,” Ko explains. Here’s how it works: just inside the tower’s angled glass roof is a massive concrete pad. As sunlight warms the concrete, air inside the space heats up and vents out through a louver high in the mechanical penthouse. Warm air vacating the building creates an updraft in shafts that go down to each floor, pulling cool air through the office space. “In the mode, there are no fans,” he adds. “It’s a fully passive system driven by the sun’s heat.” In the winter, warm air in the chimney will be recirculated to help heat the building.

Incorporating local materials into the tower will raise its sustainability quotient while showcasing the natural abundance of western Pennsylvania. Interior details for the window system, for example, incorporate local white oak. Gensler’s design team also is working with PPG, a Pittsburgh-based glass manufacturer, to develop the first heat-insulating coating for glass to be used in North America.

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As the building’s energy performance is being pushed to new limits, the design team also is enhancing the tower’s ability to drive workplace performance.

**Performance Gains**

- **42%** Portion of total working hours that the building can operate in passive natural ventilation mode.
- **91%** Portion of total floor area that can be naturally day-lit if illuminance levels are expanded to 150 lux.
- **50%** Reduction in energy use that will be achieved with innovative MEP systems and passive strategies.*

* compared with ASHRAE 90.1 2007 baseline

**Double-Skin Façade**

- **Passive Mode** Fresh air enters when sliding door is opened.
- **Mechanical Cooling Mode** Surface heat is extracted outside, radiant cooling inside.
- **Mechanical Heating Mode** Surface heat is extracted outside, radiant heat and fresh air flow inside.

**Exterior Wall Types**

- **Double-Skin Façade**
- **Thin Double Wall**

**Prime Meeting Space**

- Large conference rooms (top) and open collaboration spaces (bottom) will give employees opportunities to enjoy the views overlooking the exterior “porch.”

**Program Distribution**

- **Focus**
- **Collaboration**

**Performance with people in mind**

As it pushes energy performance to new limits, the design team is also focusing on driving workplace performance. “We want to make it a place where people want to go to work,” says Saulson. Office floors will be organized in a horseshoe arrangement, with workstations and enclosed offices for focus work along the north, east, and south walls. The collaborative spaces will face west, capturing the best views. Locating them there also creates a low-energy buffer for the office floors.

The architectural potential of these west-facing spaces benefits from double-height “neighborhoods,” each one shared by two single-story office floors. Twelve of these neighborhoods comprise the majority of the tower. “From a workplace standpoint, the neighborhood is a great addition,” says Doug Gensler. “By creating an open, two-story space, we bring people together and allow them to connect vertically between departments.”

The idea of the community space is carried a step further in the top five floors, which overlook an open-air atrium. Its envisions the space as an exterior “porch” that will provide an experience much like sitting in a park—albeit in a park that overlooks the city.

Good urban design is valued highly. “PNC doesn’t want the tower to be a fortress,” says Ko. To engage the street, it has retail on the ground floor and the base of the tower makes a transition in scale that ties it visually to the surrounding cityscape.

**Exterior Wall Types**

- **Double-Skin Façade**
- **Thin Double Wall**
A third of US workers are independent, and their numbers are growing. As more of them opt for work settings that support collaboration and networking, mainstream companies are paying attention.

The ranks of independent workers—freelancers, the self-employed, consultants, and contractors—swell in recessions, but lately, their growth reflects an entrepreneurial surge of startups and sole proprietorships. In search of supportive places to work beyond home offices and Internet cafés, they're driving the emergence of a new category of workspace: coworking.

Unlike accelerators, incubators, and mobility centers, coworking space “processes on community to attract the diversity that interdisciplinary collaboration requires,” says Gensler’s Sonya Dufner. The concept dates back to 2005, when San Francisco’s Brad Neuberg moved his on-demand workplace for freelancers to the Hat Factory to found the first coworking operation. Today, there are more than 500 coworking locations in the US and some 1,300 worldwide.

The economics of coworking are not unlike the mobility-friendly workplace: most people don’t need a desk at all times. The leverage of desk-and-equipment sharing means that 72 percent of coworking spaces are profitable after two years. A few, like the lobby of New York City’s Ace Hotel, are free of charge, drawing a some of independent workers who park out on the hotel’s artistic atmosphere and free wireless. On the other end of the spectrum, dedicated coworking spaces are emerging for midsize startups that want to hang on to the communal benefits and low overhead of the informally shared settings they’ve outgrown. Even large companies are getting into the act. In Grand Rapids, MI, four large but non-competing companies developed Grid70 as a shared “design hub” that gives each a creative boost. Nesting development teams in coworking space is seen as a way to foster innovation.

Building community

Although coworking space is often used on a first-come, first-served basis, Dufner says that those with a curated membership work better, since a balanced set of skills and interests accelerates their synergy. Grid, a successful collaborative workspace in Manhattan, has grown through referral, invitation, and application. Now Gensler is helping Grid expand, with new branches planned in New York and Los Angeles. Says cofounder Benjamin Dyett, “It’s important in an open-space environment that everyone has a compelling desire and reason to be here. There’s no place to run or hide.”

The right space can encourage interaction and support productivity. Between 10,000 and 20,000 square feet is ideal, Dufner says—big enough to feel spacious without discouraging sociability. Openness and privacy have to be balanced, though. Grid’s new spaces will incorporate privacy without exclusivity, Dyett says. “We want ideas to flow and innovation to be nurtured; barriers can literally stop that flow.” To minimize vocal distraction, Grid counters it with “pink noise”—low-level sound generated at the same frequency as the human voice to keep real conversations contained and unobtrusive.

Technology can also connect. Grid’s online marketplace, Agora, helps members find each other. A gallery of 12 LCD screens displays member content and a flat-screen monitor in the café highlights their skills. Events are another community builder. Grid’s monthly—and public—speaker series, Markit, is recorded and uploaded to a Vimeo channel. A full-time “experience director” keeps it all moving.

BY YUKI BOWMAN

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opposite: Venables, Bell & Partners, the San Francisco advertising agency, has integrated a coworking space into its offices to nurture talent. above: Blackstone Group’s coworking demo floor helps it market 229 West 43rd Street in Manhattan to tenants.
Jumpstarting a new industry

Government is investing in coworking as it looks to spur economic growth. Chicago’s newly opened 1871, designed by Gensler, is a nonprofit collaborative tech hub that’s partly supported by a $2.3 million grant from the State of Illinois—seed money to spawn new industry. Named for the year of rebirth after the Great Chicago Fire, 1871 caters to the city’s unique breed of socially active tech startups. This drives its hybrid character: part incubator and part coworking space, 1871 reflects many of the values and design elements that make other communal workplaces tick.

Says Carlos Martinez, who led the design, “1871 suggests things in the making.” Its Merchandise Mart setting is the ideal backdrop. The 50,000-square-foot space “has an industrial feel that encourages people to make it their own,” he adds. “They can do what they really want and need to do.” Flexibility, mobility, and transparency are achieved with reconfigurable furniture, robust technology, and glass partitions that allow light to penetrate the space.

The design is playful—Martinez calls it a “hackable” aesthetic—but it’s also carefully planned for its different users. There are suites for universities and investment groups. Parts of the incubator area now have startup suites and reserved workstations, while other parts support on-demand coworking in various configurations. “Not everyone has the same work habits, so you have to let people find their comfort zone,” he says.

The lobby and café bring the entire community together for socializing and events—UK Prime Minister David Cameron dropped in during a break in the NATO Conference in Chicago in May, drawing a crowd. Catalyzing the city

The ability to encourage economic growth and serendipity makes collaborative workspaces a powerful placemaking tool, a key role of the Hub, a coworking community at Fifth and Mission streets, along the city’s downtown transit corridor. The Hub promises values that connect its coworking community in a different way, says Forest City Senior Vice President Alexa Arena. “It’s not just about sharing space and hard resources, but about the cross-pollination that builds capacity for improving the world.” For example, the Hub sponsors a lively series of do-it-yourself events and roundtables, inviting its members to get involved in programming the space—a model that can work for SM as well.

The synergy in the Hub’s two-story, 20,000-square-foot space is palpable. Surrounding each floor’s shared work area are small offices that house the startups, venture capitalists, trainers, consultants, and nonprofits that feed into the entire community. Gensler worked with Forest City to explore how a similar dynamism could be cultivated at the urban scale.

Arena believes that the Hub’s growth and energy will also benefit SM: “We definitely see companies that could expand within and emerge from the Hub, so we’re thinking about how this ecosystem can play out at the scale of the development.”

As Arena notes, “Ultimately, the Hub and SM are asking the same question: how can we be the best we can be for our community?” The answer is to provide a mix of spaces that maximize interactions and shared experiences among the different tenants and the surrounding city: the coworking strategy at an urban scale.

As this suggests, coworking space is the “physical manifestation of social media,” Dufner believes. “It allows the breadth of our digital networks to deepen through shared experience.” If technology lets people work independently, outside traditional organizational structures, then coworking space gives them the possibility of coming back together to create something radically new.

Yuki Bowman is a San Francisco–based writer and 2012 architecture resident at Marin’s Headlands Center for the Arts.
This year, Gensler is funding 19 research projects, the most in its history. Work and the workplace are both important emphases of the program. The deliberately broad scope of qualitative and quantitative research efforts encompassed by the program makes its findings robust and nuanced. It also benefits from our proprietary survey and observational research tools, as well as from the breadth and depth of our market exposure.

Our research gives us an in-depth understanding of how people’s interactions with the workplace enhance or diminish their satisfaction, sense of engagement, and performance. What we learn qualifies, informs, and challenges the knowledge and assumptions we bring to workplace design, helping to ensure it supports client goals.
The story line is better known now than David Packard’s garage: Young entrepreneurs start a company in their dorm—or at a café or a coworking space. Soon, they need space to grow. By necessity, it’s casual and inexpensive, thrown together from IKEA. Fast-forward and some of these companies are on a growth tear, with hundreds if not thousands of people. Those startup days are in the past, but the impulse that got them going—the fast-moving culture that first set them on fire—remains very much in mind. They don’t want to lose it.

In this era of social media and Web 2.0, the challenge of maintaining excitement and dynamism in the workplace is an imperative. But how do these companies reconcile the pace of bricks-and-mortar with the pace of innovation? “Tech is fast, and real estate is slow,” says Gensler’s Joan Price. “Trying to resolve that conundrum is what’s driving the social-media workplace.”

Social-media companies, including those structured around social media and others that depend on its existence, dismiss the trappings of more traditional businesses. But that’s not to say they haven’t defined new trappings of their own that reflect the distinct preferences of a young workforce: raw and nonhierarchical spaces, for example, and generous amenities. There’s nothing buttoned-down about these settings. On the contrary, they’re geared toward preserving every last bit of the freewheeling ambition that got them where they are.

Given that the social-media sector continues to expand its scope, scale, and reach, the work settings these companies are now putting in place are unlikely to be the last word in where the trend is going. Yet it’s possible to discern some common themes.

**Urban, even if suburban**

Many of these companies still opt for campus settings, but the way they inhabit them is much transformed: the feel is definitely urban, even if the location isn’t. Unlike traditional suburban campuses, these new ones have a Jane Jacobs–like streetscape ambience, with lots of activities along the ground plane. Movement is encouraged, as Gensler’s Randy Howder notes. “There is parking, but shuttles are provided—often with generous incentives not to drive. Getting new housing built within walking distance of their campuses is on some companies’ radar screens. Once people are at work, there are lots of inducements for them to stay—from varied dining options to on-site day care and health care.

On the flip side, the real urban core is attractive to some social-media companies. Millennial workers, the majority of the social-media workforce, have expressed a preference for living in town in opinion surveys. San Francisco’s Mid-Market and South of Market districts are hotly competed for by social-media companies, an experience replicated in other cities. To identify suitable office space for them in urban tech hubs, Gensler has developed a geographic information system (GIS)-based query tool. Another new Gensler tool helps social-media companies track their employees’ preferences for amenities and proximity to transit and other urban must-haves.

**Dense, but open-ended**

From an organizational standpoint, social-media companies are built on transparency and trust. Top-down is out and dialogue and coaching are in. They see employees as fellow entrepreneurs, not as workers to be controlled. This ethos, which is absolutely
reflected in the social-media workspace, results in settings that are denser than the typical tech workspace. Openness is the norm. Howder notes, "One challenge is to find the right balance between open-plan, collaborative settings, which predominate, and places where people can hide away." Social-media space is highly flexible to the point of being open-ended. "The expectation is that people will constantly reshape it," he explains. "It can't be overdesigned."

Expressive by design
At every scale—individual to communal—a loose, varied, often playful, and always eye-catching visual expression is the norm. Again, the effect is urban street, not art museum. The artists are young and local. There's nothing precious about the work, either—nothing that says it's forever. "It can't be static," says Price. "If it's too familiar, that's a signal that innovation is flagging."

Yet—hoodies, food trucks, and fixed-gear bikes aside—this is not zaniness for its own sake. These companies mean business. From a real estate perspective, social-media companies are still better known for taking over existing workspace, buildings, and campuses than for developing their own. That may change, of course, as these companies continue to grow and mature.

The relatively youthful profile of these companies may impact the office building/campus template in the future, but that remains to be seen. Right now, the ability to get up to speed quickly makes repurposing existing urban and suburban properties the more frequent option.

If there's an overarching commonality to the social-media workplace, it's about supporting broader goals than innovation and speed-to-market. While these remain absolutely critical, there's an ethos in social-media companies—perhaps reflecting the boundary blurring of their young workforce—that goes beyond them to emphasize self-expression and self-fulfillment.

Susan Cain struck a chord with Quiet, her best seller, which critiques the modern workplace. Not everyone is served by its openness, she argues. In fact, a sizable percentage of the workforce finds it thwarting.

A self-described introvert, Cain is a former lawyer and negotiations consultant. Her February 2012 TED Conference talk, repackaged as a TED video, garnered its first million hits faster than any other.

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Susan Cain: Introverts experience openness differently? Cain: Both introverts and extroverts find the openness of the modern workplace a source of distraction, but introverts suffer more from it. According to Cain, companies nowadays have quiet rooms, but usually they're few and far between, and so they're in huge demand. You have to book them hours or days in advance, which is actually counterproductive to what those rooms are supposed to achieve. It should be that the minute you need to work alone or in a quieter place, you can. You shouldn't have to jump through a bunch of hoops to be able to do so.

I realize this makes me seem antiquated, but I don't understand why the private, personal office has fallen so greatly out of favor. I think there's been a massive overcorrection. Steve Jobs famously designed Pixar so that, just to go to the restroom, you had to pass through a big open atrium where you would run into people. That's a great idea, but why can't you couple it with some sense of privacy? There should be ways to design the workplace so you have more of a choice to work in an open area or in quieter places—in the nooks and crannies.

So did you write your best seller at home? SC: Not really—I wrote my entire book in a café. I felt isolated just sitting at home and working. But—and this is the challenge for companies—there's a huge difference between the environment of the café and an open space within a company. The essence of café life is freedom. You're free to come and go as you please, you're free to sit on the margins, swing but not being seen. Nobody can tap you on the shoulder and pull you into a meeting, a team-building session, or an office social event.

If openness isn't the key to innovation, what is? SC: I believe the key to innovation is spaces where people feel accepted for who they are, and are comfortable and emotionally safe, so they're not using up any excess energy on anything besides thinking and exchanging ideas. For example, look at offices where you can bring your dog to work. In that setting, a dog is more than a pet, it's a symbol that says that this is a place where anything goes, where you can be yourself and think up outlandish ideas. Symbols like that are important, and that extends into physical settings where you can make choices. Being able to shape and personalize your own space is hugely important.

In online collaboration a work-around for introverts? SC: A few years ago I would have said the online world is clearly more comfortable for introverts. It gives them a way to connect and express your ideas. But social media increasingly are becoming more about self-presentation and less about the exploration of ideas. Having said that, I'm actually optimistic about the role of online collaborations. Research shows that electronic brainstorming actually works better than in-person brainstorming, because it frees people from the distortions of group dynamics that often set in when they connect face to face. When you're talking about groups coming together to solve a problem or innovate, so many problems with group dynamics are solved by working online that I feel like we should be paying more attention to that particular usage.
Slow is the New Fast

Sherry Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, where she also directs the Initiative on Technology and Self.

Are we really overconnected?

Sherry Turkle: Yes. People text at meetings now even at corporate board meetings. Being able to text while making eye contact with the person you’re with is an important new skill. It’s hard, but it can be done. A businesswoman I know, who sits on many important boards, unapologetically does her email during their meetings. He’s a member of a “tribe of one,” he says, and only he knows what’s best for his tribe. But “tribes of one” cost us our sense of being in a community.

Overconnectivity means that we’ve become habituated to multitasking. We do it in our office environments. We are almost punished if we don’t do it or our office environments. But research shows clearly that our performance degrades for every task we multitask. We have to take this lesson to heart. There are some things that simply cannot be multitasked. These tend to be the most important ones, the ones that require thinking things through to the end.

We ramp up the volume and velocity of our exchanges to a point where we can only respond to each other by email or text. We measure success by emails or texts answered—metrics that don’t mean anything at all. Always-on connectivity erodes the capacity for solitude—to give oneself and concentrate without anxiety. It’s what enables creativity and relationship. Without it, we turn to other people to make us feel less alone, less anxious. In that situation, we can’t really learn who they are. We try to collaborate, but we’re really looking for validation. That state of mind does not make us ideal collaborators. So encouraging solitude rather than frenzied isolation is part of slowing down.

We also have to learn to substitute conversation for mere connection. We need to retrain ourselves to recognize the difference. The most important thing about conversation, if we take a long view of it, is that we’re having a conversation with ourselves, too. It teaches us self-reflection in a way that all those online tweets and texts do not.

How do you slow things down?

1. Start with food. Make it against company policy to take lunch at your desk. Then work up to more serious dimensions of company culture. Why do people feel they are more productive when they’re walled off into tribes of one?


3. Are we really overconnected!

4. Being overconnected turns multitasking into a habit, but research shows that when people multitask their performance degrades.

5. If the company rewords them for this behavior, it’s not going to change. Slowing things down often means taking a moratorium on company values.

At a personal level, overconnectivity erodes the capacity for solitude—to give oneself and concentrate without anxiety. It’s what enables creativity and relationship. Without it, we turn to other people to make us feel less alone, less anxious. In that situation, we can’t really learn who they are. We try to collaborate, but we’re really looking for validation. That state of mind does not make us ideal collaborators. So encouraging solitude rather than frenzied isolation is part of slowing down.

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Key facts and insights


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is online connectivity ever a good thing?

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Another good use of electronic connectedness is what might be called broadcasting—when you have a complicated piece of messaging that needs to go out to a large group and has to be carefully worded, but does not call for conversation with the recipients. Related to that are the “handshake” email that affirms consensus on a question that the parties have fully discussed, and emailed notes that are for review only, face-to-face interaction, because every tweak may come with a long explanation.

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Andrew Blau, who interviewed Susan Cain and Sherry Turkle, is the author of Talk: A Journey to the Center of the Internet and a contributing editor at Wired magazine.

“Sherry Turkle’s latest book, argues that always-on communication is making us overconnected, hindering our ability to focus and collaborate. Her advice: slow it down!”
In June 2012, construction of the Shanghai Tower, the world’s second-tallest building, reached its halfway point of 300 meters (985 feet). Scheduled for completion in early 2015, the 632-meter (2,073-foot), mixed-use super-highrise wraps a tapered and spiraling exterior around an efficient structure divided into nine vertical neighborhoods of 12 to 35 stories, each anchored by its own mechanical floor and atrium. The amenity-filled atria provide an armature for highrise community-building and act as climate buffers. Distributing the mechanical floors to serve the individual neighborhoods also saves energy. The spiral form of the tower cuts wind loads, reducing structural materials by 32 percent. Over 90 percent of tower is made from regionally sourced materials, further minimizing energy and transport costs.

Both the interior and exterior curtain walls of the innovative double skin have undergone multiple full-scale tests to speed on-site assembly. The unitized exterior curtain wall was similarly tested and refined to meet stringent code requirements for light pollution. Its stepped configuration and high-performance glazing also reduce interior glare and heat gain. Contributing to industry-wide advances, the Shanghai Tower will house the world’s fastest and longest elevator. At 18 meters/second (59 feet/second) it will bring guests from the lobby to the tower’s open-air observation deck—the world’s highest—in a single run. This is an unprecedented achievement.
To spark an urban renaissance, the City of Los Angeles has spurred 24/7 developments downtown, like AEG’s L.A. LIVE. Attracting the creative sector is equally high on its agenda, which is why Gensler LA’s 450 designers are now at 100 South Figueroa.

The new office transforms a long-vacant City National Plaza banking pavilion into a true workplace of the future that is designed with the firm’s mobile teams and highly interactive studios clearly in mind.

Gensler LA is an eye-catcher, its transparent main façade revealing the kinetic activity inside. Conceived from the outset as a flexible, technology-rich innovation lab, the office keeps pace with its fast-moving teams. Floating conference rooms line the centerpiece—a skylit atrium and stair that define a vibrant social and visual hub. More than half the space is collaborative, with project, team, and conference rooms, impromptu work areas, and the Red Zone, the main communal space for the office.

Achieving this meant removing parts of the roof and top floor of the 1971 pavilion and inserting a 12,000-square-foot mezzanine. Two disconnected floors became a dynamic three-story volume with a larger floor area—45,000 square feet. Colorful, soundproof breakout rooms act as visual landmarks for the open studio floors.

Designed and built in just nine months, the LEED Platinum-certified building incorporates such sustainable features as radiant chilled sails and motion-sensor lighting. Below the design started, Gensler LA did a WPI survey of itself to understand how work styles varied across its teams and what kinds of settings they needed to work effectively. The new office supports the present and future needs of a globally connected, tech-savvy design collective. And it dramatically displays Gensler’s commitment to downtown LA as the showcase of the city’s renowned creative sector, one of the engines of the California economy.
Located along the Des Moines River near the state capitol, the regal building and its recipients, provides an important educational venue for the public, and a community hallmark. New allegorical stacks were transformed into a formal ballroom whose inlaid floor marks Borlaug's legacy and the accomplishments of the World Food Prize laureates to come.

The World Food Prize was established in 1986 by Norman E. Borlaug to recognize significant contributions to eradicating global food scarcity and hunger. Borlaug, an Iowa native, is known for his Green Revolution—a series of mid-20th-century agricultural advances that helped save millions from starvation. Celebrating his lifelong contributions to eradicating global food scarcity and hunger, Borlaug, an Iowa native, is known for his Green Revolution—a series of mid-20th-century agricultural advances that helped save millions from starvation. Celebrating his significant contributions to eradicating global food scarcity and hunger, Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 and the World Food Prize in 1986 by Norman E. Borlaug to recognize significant contributions to eradicating global food scarcity and hunger. Borlaug, an Iowa native, is known for his Green Revolution—a series of mid-20th-century agricultural advances that helped save millions from starvation. Celebrating his significant contributions to eradicating global food scarcity and hunger, Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 and the World Food Prize in 1986.

The World Food Prize Hall of Laureates. The design and team integrated the restoration with such new uses as a museum, a convocation center, and a community hall. New allegorical artwork in the rotunda links the original library to the prize. A mezzanine above the stacks was recast as a balcony, while the vegetable oil–based ink.

Located along the Des Moines River near the state capitol, the regal building and its extensive gardens help revitalize the civic waterfront. The grounds discreetly house its extensive gardens help revitalize the civic waterfront. The grounds discreetly house its extensive gardens help revitalize the civic waterfront. The grounds discreetly house its extensive gardens help revitalize the civic waterfront.