

WORKCAFE: ALWAYS THE COFFEE





The BBC recently [published a piece](#) on its website to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of Ridley Scott’s movie Alien and what it could tell us about office life.

One of the interesting points raised in the piece was how the depiction of the workplace conditions on board the spaceship Nostromo did away with the gloss and swish of previous visions of the future, replaced by grime, exposed

services and strictly utilitarian interiors. The environment was one of the characters, a trick Ridley Scott later repeated in Bladerunner.

Alien, it is often said, is a Freudian film about sex and reproduction and the fears that come with them. But it’s also about the camaraderie and irritation that come with being stuck in a confined space with your fellow staff members. It’s about the pecking order, the salary disputes, the grumblings about canteen food, the remarks about who is sitting in whose favourite chair.

And it’s about the coffee – always the coffee.

It’s an interesting observation because it illustrates how important such issues are for the way people perceive their working lives and the cultures of the places in which they work.

Ask office workers what they look for in an ideal working environment and three items that will be close to the top of the list will be comfort, good coffee and reliable WiFi. What the best working environments offer to deliver this trinity is a combination of work, interaction and relaxation that makes the space both more attractive and productive. It’s a conduit for many of the most desirable objectives for the organisations, including personal wellbeing, recruitment and retention, serendipity, the development of relationships and the exchange of information.

In fact, the more general research into such issues backs up the idea that what most people want from their working environment is pretty straightforward. They want daylight, fresh air, rest, hygiene, flexibility, control, comfort, heat, socialisation and coffee. These might be basic needs, mostly free at the point of delivery, but it often takes a sophisticated approach to the culture, design and management of a workplace to offer them to people.

This paper will look at the issues surrounding the creation of a new café culture in the workplace, its benefits and they way it might be delivered. In particular, it will consider how, just as work has colonised coffee shops and other public spaces, so too has the coffee shop influenced the form and function of the workplace.

Mark Barrell
Design Director
Boss Design



What people want from an office.

When you ask people what they really want from an office space, most surveys come back with tellingly similar answers. The one that perhaps best sums them all up is from [Leesman](#), which collects more data on the workplace than any other firm in the world so provides the gold standard in this regard. It recently reported on the physical aspects of the office that people find most attractive.

- 1. Functional desk
- 2. Comfortable chair
- 3. Tea, coffee, and other refreshment facilities*
- 4. General cleanliness
- 5. Temperature control
- 6. Small meeting spaces
- 7. Restroom privacy
- 8. Functional equipment
- 9. Natural light
- 10. Nearby restaurant or cafés

What each of these factors share in common is that they represent a very basic human need. They also fit more or less neatly into two categories; comfort and a place to interact with other people, especially over a cup of tea or coffee.

This is marked by growing demand from occupiers for



offices that improve their day to day experiences and offer a more service focussed approach to the design of the workplace.

According to the CBRE 2018 Occupier Survey, more than [80 percent of tenants](#) perceive workplace amenities as essential to the employee experience and 65 percent think service-oriented

amenities are more important than fixed space-based amenities.

***Eighty-five percent of employees surveyed want this according to Leesman.**



The flat white economy.

According to a [2019 study from the Centre for Economics and Business Research](#) (CEBR) think tank, the so-called ‘flat white sector’ is now the most important driver of the UK economy, in terms of the value it adds. The flat white economy, largely made up of smaller businesses in the digital and creative sectors, contributed 14.4 percent of gross value added (GVA) to the UK in 2018, making it more important than traditional sectors such as manufacturing, mining and utilities on that measure.

The CEBR says that it has been tracking the growth of the sector for a number of years and that it

had increased its contribution of GVA from 8.7 percent in 2013 to 13.3 per cent in 2016.

The use of this name to describe the UK’s small and startup creative and digital businesses is telling. It more than hints at the idea that such businesses need to cluster in specific places to share ideas and gain access to the networks of power formed by giant firms but cannot afford the excessive rents that often go hand in hand with this hothousing.

Instead they revert to coffee shops and ultimately coworking spaces that ape many of

the aesthetic and functional characteristics of the café, especially the way such spaces can bring together people from disparate disciplines and professions to talk, share ideas and come up with new ones, a process that has been ongoing for over three hundred years.

Having grown their businesses in such surroundings, it’s no surprise that they expect to take the features of the spaces and cultures that have nurtured them so well into the places they call home as their business grow larger.

A brief history on the Work Café

There is nothing new in any of this. The first London coffee house was opened in 1652 by a Greek merchant called Pasqua Roseé who had grown fond of the drink while trading in Turkey, although a previous coffee house had opened in Oxford.

Fifty years later, Britain’s nascent coffee culture was in full swing, although King Charles II had attempted to crush them in 1675, concerned about the free exchange of political thought they fostered.

Writers, journalists, artists and anybody who wanted to share in their thoughts would gather in places like Buttons coffee house near Covent Garden. Buttons featured a white marble lion’s head into which people would deposit their stories, thoughts and poems which were published in a weekly newspaper digest.

By the beginning of the 18th Century, there were hundreds of similar cafés all over London. They all shared certain characteristics, including ready access to information, newspapers, ideas and the thoughts of a wide range of people who would declaim on a variety of subjects. Many of these features were described in the diaries of Samuel Pepys.

The coffee houses became hotbeds of innovation. The first

stocks and shares were traded in a London coffeehouse, Britain’s insurance industry was formed in Lloyds coffee house, Isaac Newton and his contemporaries frequented the coffee houses near the Royal Society and in 1754, the RSA was established in a coffee house called Rawthmells, a tradition the RSA continues to this day with the naming of the café at its offices just off the Strand.

What drove the rapid growth of such places were exactly the same forces we see in the creation of cafés, agile office designs and coworking spaces today. It is the creation of a community of people who can come together in a shared experience.

Having good coffee doesn’t hurt that experience.

One of the most obvious outcomes of the convergence of our working and non-working lives is the way that work has taken over coffee shops at

the same time that cafes and coworking spaces are invading retail and hospitality spaces. According to a [2018 report from Horwath HTL](#), the number of hotels offering coworking space is growing rapidly in response to demands from guests and other digital nomads.

Santander has opened its first Work Café in the UK. The concept was initially developed by Santander in Chile in 2016 and its success has seen 50 branches opened in Spain, Portugal, Brazil and Argentina. The bank claims the reopened branch in Leeds will work as a ‘community hub’ offering banking facilities, free coworking spaces and freshly-brewed coffee. The branch was previously closed at the end of June 2018.

The Leeds space will welcome Santander and non-Santander customers. Alongside the coworking spaces and bookable meeting rooms the new hub will host talks and events.



Creating Communities

It is essential that modern office designs create a great experience for employees and visitors and also offer people a sense of community. This is not just good for the employee but also the business, as it is essential that people work in proximity to each other at times so they can share information, create ideas and feel part of a shared goal.

So, one of the most important questions the 21st Century organisation must ask itself is; when people can work from anywhere, how do we make the office the best possible choice? And the answer is to create a working environment that meets their needs better than anywhere else.

Consequently, one of the most important characteristics of the

best office designs is the way they create a sense of community and the sort of experience that people now demand from their workplaces, including shared spaces and a place to share both ideas and information with colleagues over a drink or some food. In addition, there is also a social aspect to work that must be reflected in the design of spaces.

The best office designs allow people to network, collaborate and engineer serendipitous encounters with each other. Because they are based on an agile working model which encourages people to find the most appropriate space for the task at hand and to meet their individual needs, they encourage movement and improve general wellbeing.

So, it’s no coincidence to find that many of these characteristics are

apparent in a growing number of workplaces and not just cafés and coworking space. According to [a report in the Harvard Business Review](#), people who work in coworking spaces report levels of thriving of around 6 on a 7-point scale, which is slightly over a point higher than the average for employees who do their jobs in traditional offices. It’s no wonder that organisations want to replicate this kind of environment in their own offices.

This demand is already having an effect on the place we used to refer to as the office and which now often resembles a home, hotel, café or airport lounge. This is manifesting itself not just in changing office design idioms but also the products on the market. Many of the displays at office furniture shows are now indistinguishable from those in the domestic and hospitality sectors.



The growth of third space and the urbanisation of the office

In 1970, an anthropologist and researcher called William H Whyte decided to carry out a project looking at how people used spaces in cities. His innovation was to carry out the study as if observing tribes of people from other cultures. The focus of the study was how people interacted with social space.

Their findings were ultimately reported in a short book called [The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces](#) and a film, fragments of which are available online including [one](#) looking at the pleasures of being able to change seating arrangements. Facilities managers will recognise the behaviour from their own meeting and social spaces.

What became apparent to Whyte was that human interactions take place in ritualised and predictable forms and that the best spaces foster those interactions. Whyte writes about our tendency to engage with chance meetings in particular ways, to say goodbye as part of a ritual and our propensity to mirror the gestures of the people with whom we come into contact.

He also identifies the characteristics of the best social spaces including the proportion of sitting space to circulation space and the way we like different levels of light in a space. Crucially he also reports that if you want a space to be used, it should be stimulating and enticing.

Similar issues are addressed in the work of the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who popularised the idea of the Third Space as a way of describing how we interact with people in shared places.

The language he used has now been appropriated by office designers to describe the sorts of cafés and breakout spaces now used commonly in progressive workplaces.

It's common to hear people say that the boundaries between the traditional workplace and the outside world have become blurred but it might be closer to the truth to say that in a growing number of cases they have been eradicated and that the evolution of cities and offices is informed by a two way exchange of DNA.

One of the interesting aspects of the work of both Oldenburg and White is how they anticipate our current interest in engineering serendipity in office design. A 2014 piece in the Harvard Business Review called [Workspaces That Move People](#) found that in four different companies, across various industries (media, advertising, public sector, legal), unplanned contact was found



to be much more prevalent than planned contact. Only 34 percent of all interaction took place in a planned way, while the vast majority occurred ad-hoc and spontaneously (most often around someone's desk). Sorting things out as and when they arise can improve productivity – the quantification of this effect was recently labelled 'collisionable hours', i.e. the number of probable interactions per hour, per area.

This has important implications for workplace design, not least that there should be a greater focus on offering spaces that allow people to interact in spontaneous and unplanned ways. One way of achieving this is by aping the characteristics of ad-hoc meeting spaces in other



realms, including parks, cafés and benches.

This process is already well under way in many organisations. A new book from RIBA Publishing written by Nicola Gillen, may be called [Future Office: Next-Generation Workplace Design](#), but many of

the trends the author identifies are already evident in the many types of workplaces we see. The book shows how the office of today can vary from a sweeping open expanse of ergonomic workstations, to something that looks very much like a local, well-designed coffee shop.



Conclusion.

Work has been subject to a perfect storm of technological, cultural, economic and demographic change in recent years. The result has been a complete reassessment of how and where we work.

Fortunately, we have never known more about how to get the best out of people, address their wellbeing and what they need from the workplace. We are also fortunate to have greater knowledge of an array of design models and how they can be applied to meet those needs. So, as the old demarcations between

work and the rest of our lives are eroded by new technology and new ways of working, we are able to apply the forms and functions of other realms that have little in common with the traditional office.

As just one aspect of this, the very best modern office design has absorbed the aesthetic and functional principles of café culture to create configurable elements that create adaptable, comfortable spaces. So, just as we choose and then adapt the right kind of space when we enter a café to work on a laptop, read,

relax or share time with other people, a range of products exist that create the same dynamic in the workplace.

A work cafe doesn't have to be quiet but shouldn't be too noisy either. It can work in small and underutilised spaces, particularly where there are high levels of footfall, but can also work as a bigger space. It should also be available at all times to make the most of both the working day and the building itself. Most importantly it should be aligned to the needs of the people who work in the office.



About Boss Design.

Founded in 1983, Boss Design is one of the UK's market leading manufacturers of high quality office seating, upholstery and tables, and enjoys global success within this design-led sector.

The company leads by example and continues to improve on the delivery of an intelligent & evolving portfolio, whilst maintaining the best ethical standards.

Now employing more than 300 people across the globe, Boss Design has a wealth of experience in helping to enhance customers' corporate environments, offering choice, reliability and exceptional service.

Head Office

Boss Design Limited
Boss Drive
Dudley
West Midlands
DY2 8SZ

Tel: +44 (0) 1384 455570
Fax: +44 (0) 1384 241628
sales@bossdesign.com

London Showroom

Boss Design Limited
7 Clerkenwell Road
London
EC1M 5PA

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7253 0364
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7608 0160