

THE EVOLUTION OF OFFICE SPACES: INTEGRATING PERSONAL AND RECREATIONAL AREAS IN OPEN-PLAN WORKPLACES

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Abstract

In recent years, office environments have undergone a significant transformation, with the concept of open-plan offices becoming increasingly prevalent. While open offices provide various advantages in terms of communication and collaboration, excessive spatial proximity can negatively affect productivity. The lack of adequate personal spaces, particularly in intense and stressful work environments, may lead to psychological strain and a decline in employee motivation. From a psychological standpoint, it has become necessary to create individualized work zones—such as single, dual, or small-group areas—that enhance motivation and personal comfort. Moreover, as the boundaries between work and personal life continue to blur, incorporating recreational and relaxation spaces into office design has become an essential component of employee well-being. Noise, lack of privacy, and constant accessibility are key factors that reduce efficiency in open-plan offices. Therefore, reorganizing office environments to support the psychological and physical needs of employees in the face of rapid technological and systemic change has become crucial for both employers and workers. This study highlights the importance of creating personal spaces within open-plan offices and discusses the evolving spatial configurations of contemporary workplaces.

Keywords: Open-plan office, work environment, personal space, motivation, productivity, spatial organization

Özet

Son yıllarda ofis ortamları önemli bir dönüşüm geçirmiştir ve açık ofis kavramı giderek yaygınlaşmıştır. Açık planlı ofisler, çalışanlar arasında iletişim ve iş birliği açısından çeşitli avantajlar sağlasa da, aşırı iç içe çalışma düzeni verimlilik üzerinde olumsuz etkiler yaratabilmektedir. Uygun kişisel alanların bulunmaması, özellikle yoğun ve stresli çalışma ortamlarında çalışanların psikolojik olarak olumsuz etkilenmesine ve motivasyon kaybına neden olmaktadır. Psikolojik açıdan değerlendirildiğinde, motivasyonu artırmak amacıyla kişisel kullanımına açık, tekli, ikili veya küçük gruplar hâlinde ayrıstırılmış çalışma alanları oluşturulmanın gerekliliği ortaya çıkmaktadır. Ayrıca, iş-yaşam dengesi çizgilerinin giderek belirsizleştiği günümüzde, çalışan motivasyonunu destekleyecek dinlenme ve eğlence alanlarının ofis ortamlarında yer olması kaçınılmaz bir ihtiyaç hâline gelmiştir. Gürültü, mahremiyet eksikliği ve sürekli erişilebilirlik, açık ofislerde verimliliği düşüren unsurlardır. Bu nedenle, hızla gelişen teknoloji ve değişen çalışma sistemleri karşısında çalışanların psikolojik ve fiziksel gereksinimlerini destekleyecek ofis mekânlarının yeniden düzenlenmesi hem çalışanlar hem de işverenler açısından önem taşımaktadır. Bu çalışma, açık ofislerde kişisel alanların yaratılmasının önemini vurgulamakta ve bu bağlamda ofis mekânlarının değişen yapısını tartızmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Açık ofis, çalışma ortamı, kişisel alan, motivasyon, iş verimliliği, mekânsal düzenleme

1. Introduction

Offices are fundamentally defined as workspaces. Historical socio-economic transformations have significantly influenced the nature and design of these environments. The Agricultural Revolution marked the first major shift, followed by the Industrial Revolution, and more recently, the Information Revolution. The Information Revolution represents not only technological advancements but also comprehensive changes across socio-cultural, economic, and political domains. Moreover, this revolution has accelerated the process of globalization, which in turn has necessitated a reconfiguration of workplaces, particularly office structures.

2. Definition and Evolution of the Office

The term *office* can be defined as a workplace or an environment where clerical, administrative, and record-keeping activities are conducted. Etymologically, the word derives from the French *bureau* and the Latin *opus*, both referring to a place of organized work. In the literature, the terms *bureau* and *office* are often used interchangeably. Offices are spaces where diverse functions and operations are carried out (1).

Today, the concept of the office has been defined in numerous ways. Some definitions emphasize its functional characteristics, others highlight its role as a productive social environment, while some focus on the importance of ensuring privacy. Offices emerged as a response to the fundamental human need for a place of work. In earlier periods, this need was often met by allocating part of a residence to work-related activities; however, with the advancement of technology and the expansion of professional opportunities, a demand for larger and more specialized workspaces began to develop.

For individuals who spend a significant portion of their time in offices, creating an efficient and comfortable environment has become crucial. Moreover, the global health crises experienced in recent years have led to a reevaluation of office design and the evolution of the *home-office* concept. Offices are no longer merely spaces for working or storing materials—they also serve as hubs for communication. Office users require both internal and external communication networks to make essential decisions (2).

The historical development of office buildings has been shaped by changes in management structures and organizational hierarchies. As hierarchical relationships between managers and employees evolved, corresponding spatial arrangements and working conditions also transformed. The division of labor, administrative documentation, and hierarchical order contributed to the structural differentiation of office spaces.

Traditional office buildings began to appear as monumental skyscrapers, representing the growing scale of corporate workforces and the need for segregated departmental work areas. The emergence of Robert Propst's *Action Office* concept marked a revolutionary shift in office design. Propst introduced modular, sound-insulated, and technologically integrated furniture systems that provided comfort and flexibility within open environments. (3) This was the first time that building design and interior furniture were conceived as a unified system. The development of modular partitions led to a new industry in which furniture manufacturers replaced construction companies in shaping interior divisions.



Examples of open-plan offices from the 1970s (URL-1)

In 1973, Dutch architect Herman Hertzberger designed the *Central Beheer Office Building* in Apeldoorn, which became a pioneering example of user-centered office architecture. The building incorporated both open and enclosed work areas, granting users remarkable freedom: they could paint walls, choose colors, bring pets, or even invite family members into the workspace. The 1970s thus marked a significant period emphasizing user participation, satisfaction, and adaptability in office design.

3. The Emergence of the Open-Plan Office Concept

The open-plan office concept emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the changing dynamics of work environments, organizational structures, and management philosophies. The industrial revolution, followed by rapid economic growth and urbanization, created a demand for office layouts that could accommodate larger workforces and facilitate more efficient communication. Early office designs emphasized hierarchical arrangements, with enclosed rooms for executives and shared work areas for clerical staff. However, this spatial division was soon criticized for inhibiting collaboration and creating rigid social boundaries within the workplace.

The shift toward open-plan offices began in Germany during the 1950s with the *Bürolandschaft* (office landscape) movement, developed by the Quickborner Team. This approach sought to dissolve the strict hierarchical divisions of traditional office layouts and promote a more fluid, democratic workspace. *Bürolandschaft* emphasized open communication, visual transparency, and the psychological well-being of employees through flexible and organic spatial arrangements. The concept soon spread across Europe and North America, becoming a foundation for modern office design.

By the 1960s and 1970s, open-plan offices became synonymous with corporate modernization. Companies began to favor open layouts for their perceived efficiency and cost-effectiveness, as well as for fostering teamwork and innovation. However, as these designs became more widespread, their limitations also became apparent. Excessive openness often resulted in noise, lack of privacy, and distraction—factors that negatively affected concentration and productivity.

In response, hybrid models began to emerge, blending open and enclosed spaces to balance collaboration and individual focus. The introduction of cubicle systems, derived from Robert Propst's *Action Office* concept, represented an attempt to reconcile openness with personal space. Although these systems initially aimed to enhance employee autonomy, they later evolved into highly standardized configurations, criticized for their uniformity and depersonalization.

The growing influence of digital technology and remote work practices in the late 20th and early 21st centuries once again transformed the idea of the office. The boundaries between work and private life became increasingly fluid, giving rise to flexible and adaptive workplaces designed to support diverse activities—from focused individual tasks to collaborative meetings and informal social interactions.

The contemporary open-plan office, therefore, reflects an ongoing tension between freedom and control, openness and privacy. It continues to evolve as designers, employers, and employees seek to create environments that not only enhance efficiency but also respond to the psychological, social, and emotional needs of the modern workforce.

4. Psychological and Spatial Dimensions of Open-Plan Offices

The design of open-plan offices profoundly affects employees' psychological well-being, motivation, and overall performance. As physical environments shape human behavior and cognition, the absence of spatial boundaries in open offices introduces both opportunities for interaction and challenges to mental concentration. In particular, issues related to privacy, noise, and personal control have been identified as critical determinants of workplace satisfaction and productivity.

4.1. Privacy and Territoriality

Privacy plays a fundamental role in psychological comfort and self-regulation. In open-plan offices, the constant visibility and audibility among employees can generate a sense of surveillance and social pressure, leading to cognitive fatigue and emotional exhaustion. The inability to control visual and auditory exposure disrupts territorial behavior—a natural human tendency to claim and personalize one's workspace. Research indicates that when employees can define and decorate their personal areas, even minimally, their sense of belonging and job satisfaction increases significantly.



70

21st Century Office Interior Examples (URL-2)

The absence of privacy also affects interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Continuous exposure to colleagues' conversations, body language, and emotional expressions may create social overload, reducing empathy and increasing tension. Thus, achieving a balance between openness and personal boundaries becomes essential for maintaining a healthy office ecology.

4.2. Noise and Concentration

Noise is one of the most frequently cited sources of stress in open offices. Unwanted sound—whether from phones, printers, or conversations—interferes with concentration and information processing. Studies have shown that even low-level background noise can reduce cognitive performance by up to 20%. Persistent auditory distractions force employees to engage in mental filtering, which increases cognitive load and decreases efficiency.

Acoustic design solutions, such as the use of absorbent materials, modular partitions, and sound-masking systems, have therefore become integral to contemporary office planning. These strategies aim not to isolate employees entirely but to create a balanced environment that supports both communication and focused work.

4.3. Motivation and Emotional Well-Being

Motivation in the workplace is closely tied to the sense of autonomy and comfort provided by the environment. In open-plan settings, employees may experience decreased motivation when they feel constantly observed or unable to control their surroundings. Conversely, environments that allow flexibility—such as varied work zones, breakout areas, and relaxation corners—enhance creativity and engagement.

Psychologically supportive design approaches incorporate natural light, biophilic elements, and ergonomic furniture to reduce stress and promote well-being. The presence of recreational and social spaces within offices also contributes to a sense of community and emotional renewal. In this context, motivation emerges not only from professional achievement but also from environmental satisfaction.

4.4. Spatial Organization and Human-Centered Design

Human-centered design principles emphasize adaptability and inclusivity in office environments. The spatial organization of an open-plan office should consider different modes of working—individual, collaborative, and social—and provide appropriate transitions between them. Flexible layouts, movable furniture, and modular systems enable users to reconfigure spaces according to their needs.(4)

Moreover, incorporating “micro-spaces” or “personal pods” within open areas has proven effective in restoring balance between collaboration and concentration. These small-scale private units respond to the increasing demand for personalization without undermining the collective spirit of open offices.

In conclusion, the psychological and spatial dimensions of open-plan offices highlight the necessity of designing environments that respect human needs for privacy, autonomy, and social interaction. The success of an open office lies not merely in its openness but in its capacity to adapt to the complex behavioral patterns of its users.

5. Design Strategies for Productive and Healthy Open Offices

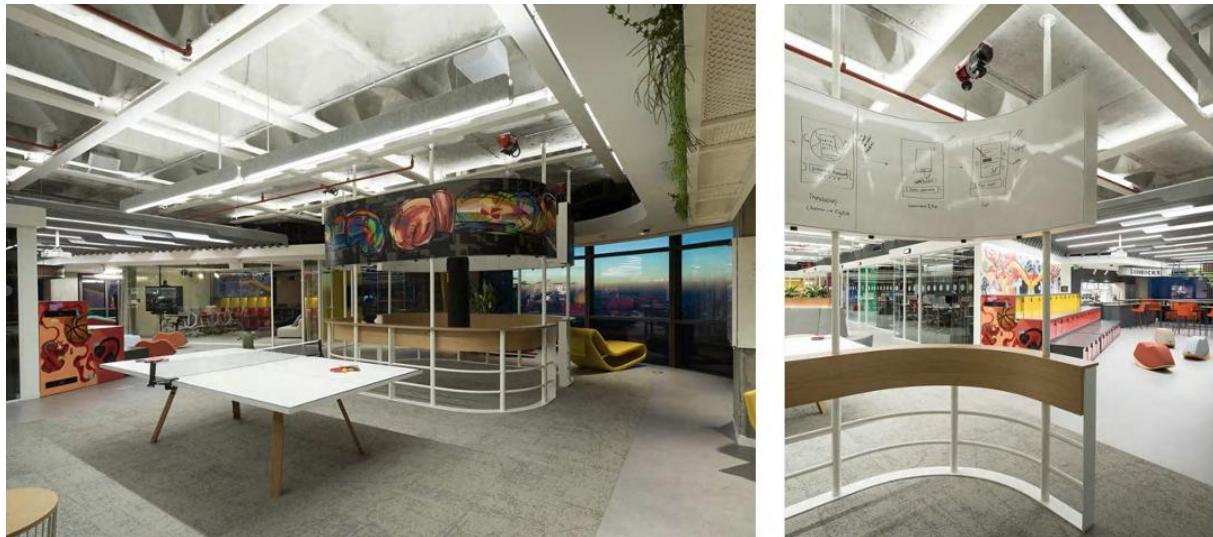
The design of open-plan offices must balance efficiency, collaboration, and psychological well-being. As workplaces evolve under technological and social influences, designers increasingly adopt evidence-based strategies that enhance user comfort and performance. This section outlines key design principles that support productivity and health in contemporary open-office environments.

5.1. Acoustic Design and Sound Management

Noise control remains one of the most critical challenges in open-plan offices. The absence of physical barriers allows sound to travel freely, often disrupting concentration and communication. Effective acoustic design involves a combination of spatial planning and

material selection. Sound-absorbing ceiling panels, textile surfaces, carpets, and acoustic partitions reduce reverberation and create zones of relative quiet.

The implementation of *sound masking systems*, which introduce controlled ambient noise, has also proven beneficial for reducing speech intelligibility and maintaining privacy. Moreover, zoning the office layout—separating collaborative zones from concentration areas—helps mitigate noise-related stress and improves overall productivity.



Examples of Personal and Recreational Areas in Open-Plan Workspaces(URL-3)

5.2. Lighting and Visual Comfort

Lighting is a decisive factor in psychological well-being and work performance. Natural light exposure regulates circadian rhythms, enhances mood, and reduces eye strain. In open offices, maximizing daylight penetration through transparent partitions and adaptive shading systems is essential.

Artificial lighting should complement natural sources by providing uniform illumination with adjustable intensity and color temperature. Task lighting at individual workstations allows employees to personalize their visual environment. Studies indicate that flexible lighting solutions not only improve comfort but also positively influence motivation and focus.

5.3. Biophilic and Environmental Design Elements

Biophilic design, which integrates natural elements into architectural environments, has gained prominence as a restorative strategy in modern workplaces. Incorporating plants, natural materials, and views of greenery contributes to stress reduction, increased creativity, and enhanced air quality.

Water features, green walls, and organic patterns further strengthen the sensory connection to nature. Biophilic interventions can be implemented at varying scales—from small potted plants on desks to entire indoor gardens—promoting both psychological relaxation and ecological awareness within the office context.

5.4. Flexible and Adaptive Furniture Systems

Flexibility is a defining characteristic of productive open offices. Modular furniture systems enable users to customize their workspace according to task requirements, fostering a sense of autonomy and control.(5) Adjustable desks, movable screens, and mobile storage units support dynamic work modes—individual focus, group collaboration, or informal social interaction.

The ergonomic design of furniture is equally essential for preventing physical strain and fatigue. Height-adjustable chairs, supportive seating, and sufficient legroom contribute to both comfort and long-term health. By allowing employees to modify their immediate surroundings, flexible systems cultivate ownership and enhance engagement.

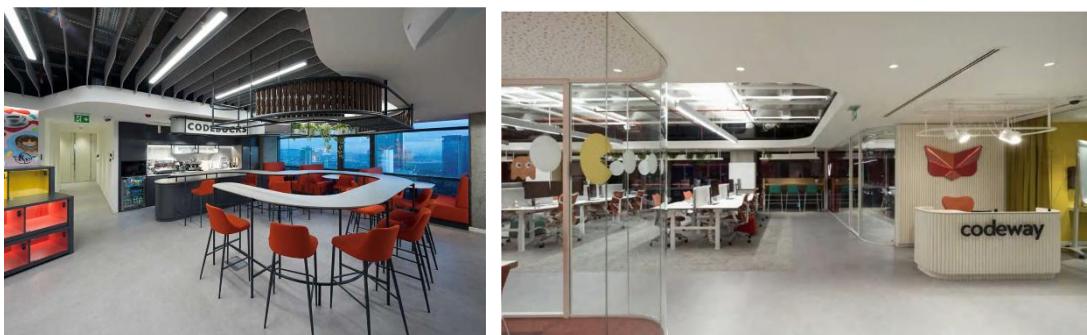
5.5. Digital Integration and Smart Workplace Technologies

Advancements in digital technologies have redefined the spatial and functional identity of offices. Smart workplace systems monitor environmental parameters—such as lighting, temperature, and air quality—and adjust them automatically to maintain optimal comfort levels.

Wireless connectivity, digital booking platforms, and collaborative software tools further support hybrid work models that blend in-person and remote interactions. These technologies not only improve operational efficiency but also provide data-driven insights for continuous spatial optimization.

5.6. Social and Restorative Zones

Recognizing the need for mental recovery and informal exchange, contemporary open offices incorporate social and restorative zones. Lounges, cafeterias, and relaxation pods serve as spaces for spontaneous interaction and mental detachment from work-related tasks.(6) These zones foster creativity, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and prevent burnout.



Examples of Personal and Recreational Areas in Open-Plan Workspaces(URL-4)

Designing such areas with warm materials, comfortable furniture, and playful color schemes enhances emotional well-being and reinforces a sense of community. The integration of social spaces thus transforms the office into a holistic environment that nurtures both productivity and happiness.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of office design reflects broader transformations in technology, management culture, and social interaction. From the rigid hierarchies of early administrative layouts to the fluid and collaborative environments of today, the open-plan office represents a continuous negotiation between efficiency, flexibility, and human well-being.

Although open offices initially emerged as a symbol of modernity and transparency, they have also faced significant criticism due to issues such as noise, lack of privacy, and employee dissatisfaction. However, recent research and design practices demonstrate that these challenges can be mitigated through thoughtful architectural strategies that prioritize acoustic comfort, natural light, biophilic elements, and adaptable spatial organization.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further reshaped perceptions of the workplace, accelerating hybrid and remote work models. This shift emphasizes the need for offices that function not merely as physical locations for work but as dynamic social and creative hubs. Consequently, the contemporary office must accommodate multiple modes of working—focused, collaborative, and virtual—while ensuring health, flexibility, and inclusivity.

In this context, **human-centered design** becomes the key framework for the future of workplace architecture. By integrating user participation, ergonomic comfort, and emotional well-being into the design process, architects and planners can create environments that genuinely support cognitive and social needs.

Technological integration will also continue to redefine the spatial and operational identity of offices. Smart systems capable of monitoring environmental quality, occupancy, and user preferences will enable continuous optimization and sustainable resource management. This digital transformation should, however, remain balanced with the human dimension—acknowledging that productivity and creativity thrive in spaces that foster trust, autonomy, and belonging.

Ultimately, the open-plan office of the future is envisioned not as a fixed typology but as a **living, adaptive ecosystem**—a place where architecture, technology, and psychology converge to enhance both organizational performance and individual fulfillment. Designing such environments requires a holistic understanding of human behavior, material innovation, and cultural context. As the boundaries between work, home, and leisure continue to blur, the challenge for architects will be to create workplaces that are not only efficient and flexible but also humane, restorative, and inspiring.

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