

December 1, 2004

11.947 New Century Cities: Real Estate, Digital Technology and Design

Working in the New Century City

New Patterns for Living

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As ubiquitous wireless technologies continue to permeate our environment, most work tasks are no longer confined to a downtown office address. Several cases illustrate club, networked, and serviced offices that take advantage of new communications technologies while remaining socially-oriented and place-based. Implications and opportunities for the New Century City will emerge as living patterns become based on quality of life decisions as opposed to workplace proximity. A new development model for the MIT Campus is proposed based on these principles.

Our work is becoming separate from our workplace. As ubiquitous wireless technologies continue to permeate our environment, most work tasks are no longer confined to a downtown office address. This phenomenon is beginning to have a major effect on the shape of the central business district, as well as our individual lifestyles. Different ways of living and working in the digital world suggest a need for a new physical place to accommodate the recombination of these activities.

My ultimate goal is to suggest a new prototype for living and working as part of my master degree thesis: an apartment/office hybrid for the independent worker. This new model will expand on the old concept of live/work by also providing services (administrative assistance, meeting spaces, networking opportunities) needed to run a business on a shared basis. This environment will be ideal for individuals or small groups starting a business, expanding to a new geographical market, or those working as independent consultants. In my thesis, MIT and its Cambridge environs will serve as a case setting to apply this model. The research for this seminar paper concentrates on the “working” portion of this idea. The case studies illustrated provide innovative examples and ideas for moving the activity of working out of the typical downtown office building. However, the focus of these examples is still on physical places for work, although new technology may make it possible for work to be a more nomadic activity.

How We Could Work

The notion of telecommuting is highly accepted and prevalent today, however the New Century City has richer options for working to offer. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 19% of Americans did some or all of their work at home in 2000.¹ However, a more interesting study would reveal how many people did their work away from a traditional office or workplace (not just at home), and where they chose to do this work. Although telecommuting may liberate some of us from traffic congestion and preordained work hours while allowing us to spend the day in our pajamas, many essential work activities cannot take place at home. We still need face-to-face interactions and occasional physical access to services. We as humans want a place to call home. I also believe we want and need a regular, physical place to work that will

¹ Canadian Telework Association. *US Telework scene – stats and facts*. October 2004. 22. Nov. 2004. <<http://www.ivc.ca/studies/us.html>>

enrich our professional (and social) lives through stimulating interactions with other people. The growing robustness of digital communications and increased connectivity means that this place need not be an hour-long commute away.

Where We Could Work

In his analysis of office types of the past and present, Frank Duffy suggests four organizational models of workplaces: hives, cells, dens, and clubs.² Workers in a hive perform similar, routine tasks that require little interaction. Cell offices are composed of private, enclosed space for intense individual work. Dens are for interactive group work, in fields such as design or media. Clubs provide a work atmosphere that is flexible with many different environments. Just as a nightclub has quiet spaces for sitting, lounge areas for interacting with new people, and dance floors for expending energy, a club office has spaces to accommodate both autonomous and group activities. Typical users of the club office include advertising firms, IT companies, and management consultants.³

Of all the models, I see the club as playing the most significant role in the New Century City. However, clubs need not be places exclusively for the use of one firm. This same format can be adapted for the needs of individual workers or small groups. Technology will NOT turn us into holed-up recluses or “rootless, laptop-toting, cell-phoning nomads”.⁴ The case examples that follow illustrate alternatives to the typical office building that are socially oriented and place-based.

Case Examples

1) Chiat/Day Offices in Venice, California (1991) and New York City (1994)

The advertising firm of Chiat/Day is known for its unusual work environment. These quintessential club offices provide individual and group work spaces in a colorful and playful atmosphere. Working at the office is optional, and the assumption is made that most Chiat/Day employees would choose to work either at home or on the road, checking in at the office only occasionally. All of the

² Francis Duffy. *The New Office*. (Conran Octopus Limited: London, 1997) 61.

³ Duffy. 65.

⁴ William J. Mitchell. *E-topia: “Urban life, Jim – but not as we know it”* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 1999) 72.

spaces and equipment are shared, although a place to work must be reserved. One critique of this environment is that it has all the personal space of an airport lounge: getting work done there is certainly possible, but there is no option for a more permanent situation.⁵

2) United Spaces in Copenhagen, Denmark (2001)

United Spaces is “a unique blend of workplace and club where people get together to create a networking office”.⁶ Building off an earlier model in Stockholm, United Spaces Copenhagen provides workstations, meeting rooms, a café, and networking events for members who pay a monthly fee. The design of the space encourages interaction among members: in the “networking arena” where the main workstations are located, members are encouraged to sit at a new desk each day.⁷ A website and intranet, which presents profiles of United Spaces members, provide a virtual face to the office.

3) Regus D-Office near Amsterdam, Netherlands (2001)

The Regus D-Office is actually three separate locations around Amsterdam that serve as serviced-office suburban outposts.⁸ The peripheral locations reduce commute times for workers. Services are available by the hour, 24 hours a day.

4) aWarehouse, San Francisco, California (1994)

⁵ Duffy, 197.

⁶ Eciffo Magazine. *United Spaces*. Autumn 2002. 23. Nov. 2004.
<http://www.eciffo.jp/en/project/project015_e.html>

⁷ Torben Elgaard Jensen. “The Networking Arena.” August 2002. 28 Nov. 2004.
<http://web.cbs.dk/departments/ioa/staff/elgaard/The_Networking_Arena.pdf>

⁸ Eciffo Magazine. *Regus D-Office*. Autumn 2002. 23. Nov. 2004.
<http://www.eciffo.jp/en/project/project014_e.html>

This model combines the idea of a networked office with living space. An old factory was converted to living and shared work space by Stanford graduates interested in maintaining a university environment after graduation.⁹

The Old Office

Real estate is a fiscal commodity as well as a physical, tangible commodity. The construction of downtown office buildings is driven by land value and market timing as well as by the needs of its inhabitants. However, the changes in work patterns that are taking place have implications on the use of the downtown address. As more work activities are completed outside of the main office, this space can be reallocated to uses that directly benefit from a central, prestigious business location such as client meetings, employee gatherings, etc. Perhaps the new mantra of commercial real estate will become “accessibility, accessibility, accessibility” (to information as well as transit nodes) as opposed to “location, location, location”. As Frank Duffy predicts, “In the cities of the twenty-first century offices will continue to exist, but will be designed in a richer and wider variety of ways – as streets, villages, colleges, clubs – to encourage interaction.”¹⁰

Where to Live (and Work)

If proximity to a central office is no longer the main consideration in choosing a place to live, what other factors will continue to inform this decision? When one can work anywhere, quality of life can become the deciding factor. The following chart illustrates some singular examples of places to live when there is one main lifestyle goal.

⁹ Eciffo Magazine. aWarehouse. Autumn 1996. 23. Nov. 2004.
<http://www.eciffo.jp/en/issue/29/eciffo29_e.html>

¹⁰ Duffy, 102.

Quality for Living	Example
agreeable weather	Hawaii
natural beauty/outdoors	Aspen
solitude	Montana
travel/adventure	out of a backpack
culture/excitement	New York City
personal reasons	near family and friends
intellectual stimulation	Cambridge, MA

Naturally, choosing a place to call home is a highly personal decision influenced by many factors and combinations of these “qualities for living”. There is no one environment that will suit all people. The following example of a new development model for MIT might fit the needs of people who value intellectual stimulation above all else.

An Apartment/Office Hybrid at MIT

Many successful live/work situations have been for artists looking for cheap space, interesting people, and a stimulating and unique environment. I believe there is a niche in the live/work phenomenon for other types of creative geniuses: web developers, entrepreneurs, designers, and others looking for a flexible lifestyle that enables them to work independently. Instead of the hip artist neighborhoods of Williamsburg in Brooklyn or The Mission in San Francisco, some might prefer the academic environs of Cambridge.

Some might also find a working lifestyle similar to that of a student appealing. As an MIT graduate student, I find myself working in a variety of environments depending on what activity I’m doing or even my mood. A quiet seat in the library may be best for reading, a café for writing, our department’s student common room for a group project, or at home when I’m feeling lazy. (I almost always work on my personal laptop; occasionally using the department’s computing resources for specialized tasks.) I have access to vast stores of knowledge through the institute’s library resources, the faculty, and my colleagues. There is also an administrative network of shared services that

allow me to receive mail and make copies and phone calls. The similarities between this working atmosphere and that of a club or serviced office space are unintentional but relevant. Living on campus (or even in a neighborhood heavily populated by students) provides another layer of connectivity. Even further opportunities are available to meet people outside of my department in the common spaces of the dorm.

I would like to open up aspects of the MIT environment to individuals who find value in the living and working environment that the student lifestyle has to offer. Locating a new residential community on or near the MIT campus would add to the critical mass necessary to make the campus more livable. This project would also provide an opportunity for MIT to invest in and develop its real estate assets, while revitalizing under-used parcels in its portfolio. Several buildings and sites along the portion of Massachusetts Avenue that stretches from Building 7 to Central Square are ready to be renovated.

Creating a club-style office facility as part of the residential project is a promising possibility. However, MIT may also want to utilize its existing spaces on campus that are underused during certain times of the day or year. Just as students have access to specific buildings, labs, and studios with their ID cards, the proposed residents could also have access to certain facilities at specified times through a card access system.

Execution of this idea would require a detailed market study of the commercial and residential markets in Cambridge. However, a few existing precedents are already putting these ideas into play in the area around Cambridge. The Cambridge Innovation Center, located in Kendall Square, provides short-term office leases and bundled services targeted for technology start-ups.¹¹ A proposal has also been made to construct an apartment community only for MIT affiliates over 55 in East Cambridge, brokering a stronger link between retirees and the campus.¹² MIT has a history of taking an entrepreneurial approach to education and developing collaborative partnerships with

¹¹ Cambridge Innovation Center. *The Best Boston Office Space Solution*. 28. Nov. 2004. <<http://www.cambridgeincubator.com>>

¹² Beckett W. Sterner and Theresa F. Eugenio. *The Tech*. "Senior Faculty Propose MIT Housing Nearby for Alumni" 14. January 2004. 28. Nov. 2004. <<http://www-tech.mit.edu/V123/N64/64seniors.64n.html>>

the business world. My proposed live/work environment would provide an innovative way for MIT to use its assets while further extending its community.

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