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Are you skyping comfortably?

By Victoria Maw

Incorporating elements of domestic space at work is an increasingly popular trend



The 'town hall' space of AOL's office in Palo Alto, California, designed by Studio O+A

The idea of working from home, perched on a sofa, a mug of coffee in hand, is universally appealing. And with iPads, BlackBerrys and WiFi, it is increasingly easy to do. However this luxury is not available to everyone and some employers are now beginning to realise the benefits of bringing features of the home into the office instead.

Following the lead of Silicon Valley's internet hipsters, many office designers are finding inspiration in residential interiors. These days, office life can involve sending emails from a deck chair, doing research in a wood-panelled library or holding a meeting on a designer sofa.

A more domestic style of office design has been popular with companies since the dotcom boom and, although many other sectors have since embraced it, internet companies continue to lead the way. Studio O+A, an office design company based in San Francisco, has worked on the interiors for companies such as Facebook, Paypal and Yelp. This summer it designed a new AOL office in Palo Alto, California. Prior to the redesign, it was a typical office “with cubes, private conference rooms and nothing in between,” says Primo Orpilla, a principal designer at Studio O+A. It now incorporates distinctly domestic elements, from soft furniture and cosy seating areas to an outdoor space with garden chairs and a large mixed-use space with pool tables and games. “People are spending more and more time at their office and we want to make sure they are comfortable,” says Orpilla, “so the residential correlation is definitely deliberate.”

More informal arrangements in the workplace have come to be expected, according to Shaun Baker, head of design at Morgan Lovell, a UK-based office design and refurbishment company. His projects include the London office of Skype, where the brief demanded a space that felt “very relaxed and soft and to some extent, like you’re sat at your lounge at home”. He has also done work for management consultants, solicitors and publishers. “Exposure to working from home, hotels, airport lounges and coffee shops [means] people’s expectations have been heightened,” says Baker. “Employers see that and they are now aware of the benefits to the business of making those situations available to their staff.”



Yelp's offices in San Francisco

A key feature of many of these office designs is a big central kitchen or communal space,

which works in the same way as a living room or family room would. Orpilla describes the concept – which he says at least 95 per cent of his clients want – as a “town hall area”, a place where people from all departments can come together and “cross-pollinate”. AOL’s town hall space is “like the multipurpose room in a gymnasium at a high school. You can eat food there, hang out there, have meetings there ... whatever you want to do”.

Baker says the advantage of this type of space is that people tend to mix more naturally with each other: “Businesses don’t like people to sit in teams anymore. They like everybody to mix and match as they are finding that it creates better communication. So it is all about giving people the kind of environment that they need and feel comfortable in to be more productive.”

To provide the necessary comfort, designers are introducing some domestic furniture into offices. Baker uses a mixture of commercial and residential pieces from the likes of Tom Dixon, EDC and even Ikea, while Orpilla has sourced wing-backed chairs from flea markets and commissioned custom-made pieces such as AOL’s picnic-style benches made from butcher’s blocks. What it comes down to, explains Orpilla, is giving your employees a few creature comforts: “You are working in a virtual world all the time, you need something that can remind you of this grounded world that we live in and it is nice to do it with familiar things rather than a super-slick environment.”

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Homing from work: four model offices

- **AOL** The “town hall” area has meeting areas, a games room, a bar and a café. Furniture includes new and vintage pieces (see chair) and outdoor furniture made from recycled plastic
- **Yelp** The space looks like the living room of an urban house, with tartan wallpaper, framed portraits and beer on tap
- **Skype** Morgan Lovell’s design for the London office took into account that many staff are under 30. There is a lounge area, a games space and coffee shop with booth seats. Staff are able to sit and work



anywhere

- **Rackspace** This IT office has a 1970s-inspired lounge with an artificial fireplace and an old fashioned library. The “garden”, decorated in decking and fake grass, is on the third floor

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