



Vitra and the office of the future

In the early 1990s, several developments came together at Vitra with a focus on the same complex of problems. The full concentration of the company was devoted to casting aside problematic workplace conventions and re-thinking the office environment. One conviction lay at the core of these efforts. Today it seems trivial, but at the time it was revolutionary: if people spend most of their time in the work environment, then real life cannot simply be put on hold until they have left its confines. Life has to be accommodated and facilitated within the office as well.

Early on, Vitra had made it its business to contemplate the nature of the workplace. The very first office furniture programme embraced by Vitra as the European distributor is recognised as the original open-plan furniture system. Developed by George Nelson and Robert Probst, the so-called Action Office translated a new conception of workflows, movements and sociological changes into a collection of furniture. Probst later commented: „There has been a regrettable tendency to try to reduce all offices to a uniform appearance with the only variations being in status orientation.“ Simply redesigning the old office furniture typologies would no longer do. Modularity, growth and mobility were the leitmotifs of the revolutionary idea behind the Action Office. The new manifestations of individual components derived from observations of everyday workstation routines. A precise understanding of the spatial successions of typical work sequences resulted in a shortening of physical distances and a much more efficient operating range for desk workers.

After the launch of Metropol – the first office furniture system developed directly by Vitra, in collaboration with Mario Bellini – the 1992 introduction of the Ad Hoc system designed by Antonio Citterio constituted the next major breakthrough. Rigorous to the core, Ad Hoc is based on a complex array of components that can generate an infinite number of combinations, express new architectural standpoints and fulfill ever-changing organisational requirements in the workplace. It has been continually developed and expanded over the years and remains a source of fresh momentum in the office. Conceived as an open organisation of diverse modules, it has been able to adapt to changing demands and successive generations of technology.

Yet alongside this, Vitra simultaneously initiated free-ranging explorations on this topic within the framework of a research project. Led by the Vitra Design Museum, the project brought in three renowned Italian masterminds of design and architecture, each with a very different approach: Ettore Sottsass, Michele de Lucchi – both of whom had worked for many years on the design of office furnishings and office equipment – and Andrea Branzi, who came to the topic of the workplace as a theoretician. The project was named Citizen Office to signal its central aim of cultivating a new profile for the office as an urban sphere of living and as a meeting place for self-determined, independent individuals. Emanating from ideologies of control, authority and standardisation, the earlier hierarchies of Taylorism – which had been obsolete since at least the 1960s – were countered by the paradigm of a free office citizen. The utopian imaginings addressed such categories as variability, mobility, atmosphere, desegmentation, transformation, demystification and nomadism. Models were developed along these themes with a real world applicability aided by input from Siemens, which collaborated with the exhibition organisers to assess the feasibility of the technological visions. In considering the workplace, Citizen Office proceeded from an examination of urban life rather than taking the office itself as the starting point. Looking back, the approach of the project with its acceptance of complexity is an astoundingly accurate anticipation of the transformation currently taking place.

In 2000, Vitra started work on two groundbreaking lines of development, both of which drew on basic research into the office of the future. The Network Office was an extensive in-house experimental programme designed to accommodate most of Vitra's varied administrative activities, while the Joyn furniture system was conceived as a model that would challenge all previous ideas about offices. Both of these forward-looking visions typify the character of Vitra, as both ventures are quintessential interpretations of the collage concept.

London interior designer Sevil Peach had encountered Vitra some years previously when she was responsible for several unusually inspirational offices that included Vitra products. This is

how Vitra had always imagined that its range of office 'tools' would be used to create good living spaces. To add to the knowledge already gained, and to obtain practical verification of what specific products can achieve and how they perform in the context of real work processes, Vitra decided to undertake a large-scale experiment on itself. Using items from the Vitra Collections, Sevil Peach was to design an experimental office in Weil am Rhein where more than 100 people would work in different areas covering an area of more than 2000 square metres. This creative network of spaces was to be a 'breathing office' that would be open to rapid changes - an environment where different working methods could coexist. Territorial and non-territorial areas were to alternate with one another, zones for concentration and communication were to be adjacent, private spaces were to coexist with public ones, fixed and movable units were to interact and a continuous flow was to be facilitated in a highly reactive and self-organising environment. The infrastructure - so the thinking went - should itself be given the same ability as was demanded of each team member in a networking situation: the ability to be flexible. The ideal was viewed as an open patchwork of differentiated types of workspaces and spaces, with modules that users could adapt to their individual needs so as to programme a personal work environment; this would create customised locations and semi-autonomous subsystems within the overall system. In this reinterpretation of the office, the old definition of the workplace has been superseded by the concept of personalised situations that can be recreated time after time. The experimental Network Office was designed to provide empirical verification of Vitra objects in everyday working life; it is constantly being developed as new products are put through practical trials.

The Joyn, Level 34, Workitand Playns furniture systems presented in recent years make reference to the considerations of Citizen Office. And the Net'n'Nest concept, which accommodates the office citizen's need for retreat in protected private zones, as well as the necessity for exchange with fellow citizen-colleagues, is likewise a consequence of the Citizen Office approach: In the Network Office, Sevil Peach has designed carrels, a library and sofa islands to meet this need. As part of the Net'n'Nest presentation, Jasper Morrison and the Bouroullec have created new elements dedicated to occasional solitary working, private discussion and interchange among two or three partners.

Wolfgang Scheppe