



creative SP

A 'Carnival of Ideas' theme inspires the design of the Ogilvy & Mather offices in Guangzhou.





ACES

How much success in the advertising business can be attributed to a great working environment? Creative director Andy Walsh gains security access to the 'idea centres' of Australian advertising agencies to find out.

Words by Andrew Walsh

In my twenty years in advertising, I've sat in meeting rooms called 'brain pods' and 'confessionals', taken a ride on a playground slide to collect a package from reception, swung in hammocks while mulling over new ideas, played pinball machines, belted punch bags, and even trotted into a new business pitch meeting astride a pony! In my game, agencies will try anything to appear creative. Sometimes it's all a little too try hard, but get the balance of atmosphere and environment right and a workplace will literally percolate with creativity. And there's no better feeling than that.

But what makes a truly creative space? Certainly it's not dumping Gen Ys into a playpen and hoping for the best. To be successful, any agency needs to tear down the invisible walls of authority, politics, hidden agendas, tradition and history. This soft rebellion encourages communication, collaboration and the cross pollination of ideas.

As Dan Wieden, CEO of Wieden+Kennedy once said: "I want spaces that help my staff lead surprising, audacious lives. This will infect everything else we do."

Think outside the polyhedron

Dylan Taylor, Creative Director of BMF, doesn't think an agency needs a special place for creative work. "You can have a great idea

↖ ↗ Neogama BBH's reception in São Paulo, Brazil; sliding into reception at the Google offices in Switzerland; getting comfortable in a lounge space at Lowe in Sydney.

anywhere. However, it's certainly more interesting turning up every day to a stimulating environment.

"Our design principles were simple. No offices. No walls. And very, very, high ceilings. The open plan encourages a greater flow of ideas by people simply getting up and talking."

The BMF workspace is vast, with a repurposed, industrial feel. It buzzes with energy but is incredibly intimate and quiet all at once. Every corner has been designed to benefit the comfort of employees - and they clearly feel appreciated. "If you work in a beautiful environment it certainly lifts you up," says Taylor. "Every person sits on an Aeron chair, simply because they are the most comfortable and best designed for that task."

For more than ten years, BMF has enjoyed a steady stream of business success, culminating in being voted 'Agency of the Decade' at the 2009 B&T awards. Does Taylor put this success down to their working environment though? "It would be difficult to attribute a specific business win to it, but I would say it certainly counts overall and creates a great impression on prospective employees and clients."

Stephen Pearson, CEO of Lowe, points out that it is as much to do with the cultural heritage of the company and an atmosphere of open communication that enables creative thinking. And just as important is the building that houses the agency.

"It has to be designed well; have integrity with the culture of the place; enable great communication and reduce silo mentality. But it doesn't have to be a design icon in itself. The Opera House, and Tate Modern and Guggenheim [museums] are very creative places, but they'd be terrible to actually work in," says Pearson.

Step inside Lowe's Sydney operation and you see what Pearson means. The office is a rustic, old loft style wool store peppered with sophisticated technology, making the visitor feel instantly warm and welcome.

Based on what the big bosses say, well designed creative spaces increase motivation, improve communication, expand creative thinking beyond the creative department, and showcase an agency's commitment to generating new ideas for its clients.

"Creative spaces should make you want to be there," adds Pearson. "They help you enjoy being at work. They should at least be interesting and admired rather than be dull and debilitating. Clients like coming [to Lowe] simply because our space is pretty cool."

The future office is virtual

So if brain pods, ideas boards, bars and gaming rooms provide the entertaining additions of creative workplaces now, what's in store for advertising offices of the future? Says Pearson: "Dedicated desks will be less 'normal'. Workplaces will become more for meetings than just a battery of desks. This requires absolute trust. I think it's entirely possible and potentially productive for our business." >>

“ Idea generation needs to take place in a risk free zone. And that can happen anywhere. You can be brilliant in a tent. ”

Dylan Taylor envisions a more pragmatic direction. "The fashion seems to be for old, established buildings to be stripped out, renovated and repurposed. The fusion of old world solidity and new world technology seems to be where it's going."

This future direction starts at the top, says Pearson. "We are entirely open plan so management is observed all the time. In turn, I think our team feels relaxed in their space."

The consensus is that gimmicks and showiness in a space are pointless unless people feel empowered to innovate. The most stimulating space, no matter how well designed and appointed, is a joke within a creatively stifling business. Agencies should literally make room for creativity. A creative space is not a solution to business success in itself, more a step in the right direction.

Elastic spaces and ant farms

There's much talk of tearing down the walls to keep ideas circulating and promote interactivity in the workplace. Do open spaces really contribute to creativity though? Sputnik Creative Director Ed Carveth thinks so. "Your surroundings have a direct influence on the way you think and work. We have one desk that travels the entire office, linking every department, and each one with another. At the centre is the 'grassy knoll' - the agency's hub for meetings, relaxation, or just for chats at the end of a busy day.

↳ ↓ ↘ Bringing the outside in at the Ippolito Fleitz Group, Germany; cool space for better business at Sputnik in Melbourne; a quick game of Foosball between meetings at DDB.

"It's everyone's job, no matter what their role, to be part of creating the most innovative work possible. And the working environment needs to facilitate just that."

Similarly, when you walk into an agency like Digital Eskimo it's obvious: this place was made for play. David Gravina, Creative Director says: "The walls are covered in pin boards made from recycled echo panelling. We literally work on them to map out and synthesise our ideas into cohesive design strategies. You simply can't beat it for team collaboration and we make the most of it!

"It's the right thing to do. You have to walk the talk. Our space is an extension of our ethos. We have followed through on what we believe. A lot of this can look messy - and that's ok - because a truly creative process is messy."

Gravina sees the future taking an even more radical step. "Augmented reality within the space will be huge. I see project status updates and other data in the physical space, either through projection or headsets or other technologies, or playing with the open source white boarding technology, using a Nintendo Wii controller. One day we even hope to create the first *Get Smart*-style 'Cone of Silence!'"

For Carveth, the future's about "getting different minds, personalities and skill sets together to crack problems. You need elastic spaces that stretch to fit the project, places a person or



INSIDE AN AGENCY

with Matt Eastwood, Vice Chairman and National Creative Director, DDB



Is your office the most creative environment you have ever worked in?

Definitely. As I often say to people, if you were shooting a movie about advertising, this would be a place to shoot it. It's very cool to look at, but very functional to work in.

Open door, closed door policy?

We've embraced the idea of open plan, but made sure there's still enough privacy within the overall space. Creative people need to make noise. We need to play music. Tell jokes. Watch YouTube. Laugh loudly. You can't do all that if you're worried about interrupting the people around you. That's why it's open plan-ish.

If the look of an agency is creative does it mean its output will be more creative too?

There's definitely an element of theatrics that is

important in advertising. When clients come into the space, it feels how they think it should feel: exciting, creative and unconventional, especially compared to more corporate environments. Many of our clients even have security keys so they can just make their own way around the office. But from a team perspective, the space feels like it gives you permission to be creative. I've worked in offices that don't provide this kind of architectural inspiration, and it makes a huge difference.

Do you provide greater freedom for employees to work their own way?

The simple answer is, yes. Our office was designed with a huge amount of common areas and breakout spaces. Generally, you'll find 50 per cent of the creative department working somewhere other than their office. There's an outdoor balcony, which is a brilliant place to work



team can think, scrum and 'do'. Walls to scribble on, pods to hide in and quiet space bubbles (aka the cone of silence) where meetings take place with co workers in a plastic bubble. And an ant farm wall instead of the '80s fish tank!"

↑ Creativity in cardboard at Nothing in Amsterdam.

A place to talk, share and have fun

It's essential that teams have places to exchange and share ideas, says Taylor. "The collaborative nature of what we do, with many people touching a piece of work, would simply not be possible if we were shut away in cubicles. The free nature of communication is a great benefit of being open plan."

The Furnace's Paul Fenton believes in making a workplace an environment you want to stay in. "People spend a lot of time in their working environments. Making it fun and a little different were priorities. It's also like a massive business card. It tells people who we are and what we do as soon as they walk into reception. When I was thinking about the space, I didn't really think about it like an office, it was more about making something that would make you smile and feel good."

All agreed, employees should be free to move around and talk, using walls or whatever surface necessary to help stretch and share their ideas.

A place that values ideas

The typical late 20th century office with its worker cubicles, traffic corridors, executive bathrooms and coveted corner office

has no place in the modern world. As a worker, your only value was the function you performed until the gold watch ceremony twenty five years later.

Brave Creative Director Mark Lees says their office is anything but typical. "Ideas are pinned on walls. Dozens are added, thrown away and tossed out. It's noisy, chaotic and fun."

Idea generation needs to take place in a risk free zone, and that can happen anywhere. According to Mercer Bell Creative Director, David Bell, it's not all about the space. "You can be brilliant in a tent. Back in the day, I worked in a large room where the creatives pretty well sat on top of each other," he says. "It smelled bad, but we did some great work. Not a long term solution though. It's all down to the people in the room and everyone getting along, which is rare."

Wake up the brain of your business

It would be foolish to argue that quirky, cool spaces inhibit creativity. But to get the best from creative people, they need a place to escape the everyday. Like all creative tools and techniques, it's clear from my conversations that a stimulating workspace can help improve creative work. I am sure that this principle of making people feel comfortable and motivated and involved at work and in their office space would apply to any industry.

A space is still no substitute for a team of highly motivated passionate people taking part in defining their own culture. Let the users of the space define the space that nurtures their creativity. Let it attract and keep the thinkers of tomorrow. As they say in the movie *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come." •

Andy Walsh has more than twenty years' creative experience in Australia and London working with the world's leading brands. He has won awards or had his work recognised at ADMA Australia, the Caples, Cannes Lions and Mobius in America. Images on this page, page 24 (far left), page 22 (main and top left) and covers provided by the agency interiors website www.thisaintnodisco.com. *Where We Work: Creative Office Spaces* (www.thisaintnodisco.com/book), published by HarperCollins, investigates agency interiors around the world.

when the sun is shining, a gaming room, decked out with games consuls, which is very popular. But we also have smaller, quieter rooms, which can be exactly what your mind needs when you're writing some hardcore copy.

It's funny, in some ways the space feels like a big house, built around a central kitchen. Bev, who runs the kitchen, is very much like our mother. She makes sure we're eating well, especially during those big pitches where you tend to work late nights and eat badly. Bev makes sure we're not just filling up on pizza.

Does the space help employees to feel less observed or judged?

We have a very open door policy. I guess due to the fact that there are very few doors. But seriously, we encourage everyone to mingle and to share ideas, often and freely.

How do you encourage greater employee and client social interaction?

Building a cafe into the space means there is a natural place for people to meet over coffee or meals. We also have the obligatory Foosball and ping-pong tables - a favourite place to brainstorm.

Does a better business space help the creative process?

You only enjoy spending time at the office if it's an enjoyable place to spend time. That's what we were aiming for. We also have a lot of events staged within the space in order to make sure creativity is always taking a front seat. We use the common areas to host temporary photography or art exhibitions. We recently had an employee photography exhibition around the idea of passion - anyone could submit a photo, as long as it reflected the theme of passion.

Will future workspaces be more integrated with online solutions like working from home - what are your predictions?

I'm a huge advocate of new technology. It will provide the foundation for workspaces of the future. Of course, all offices will be wifi enabled, so you're no longer bound to your desk. But advances like online video calls mean that you can stay in virtual contact, no matter where you are in the world.

People should feel empowered to work from wherever they feel most comfortable. Even if that just means another room within the building. Some people like the idea of sitting in a building and thinking. I like the idea of being at a desk. Personally, I like to feel like I'm at work, when I'm working. Creative workspaces of the future will allow for both. And all the variations in between.