

The new oases

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Illustration by Bell Mellor



Nomadism changes buildings, cities and traffic

FRANK GEHRY, a celebrity architect, likes to cause aesthetic controversy, and his Stata Centre at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) did the trick. Opened in 2004 and housing MIT's computer-science and philosophy departments behind its façade of bizarre angles and windows, it has become a new Cambridge landmark. But the building's most radical innovation is on the inside. The entire structure was conceived with the nomadic lifestyles of modern students and faculty in mind. Stata, says William Mitchell, a professor of architecture and computer science at MIT who worked with Mr Gehry on the centre's design, was conceived as a new kind of "hybrid space".

This is best seen in the building's "student street", an interior passage that twists and meanders through the complex and is open to the public 24 hours a day. It is dotted with nooks and crannies. Cafés and lounges are interspersed with work desks and whiteboards, and there is free Wi-Fi everywhere. Students, teachers and visitors are cramming for exams, flirting, napping, instant-messaging, researching, reading and discussing. No part of the student street is physically specialised for any of these activities. Instead, every bit of it can instantaneously become the venue for a seminar, a snack or romance.

The fact that people are no longer tied to specific places for functions such as studying or learning, says Mr Mitchell, means that there is "a huge drop in demand for traditional, private, enclosed spaces" such as offices or classrooms, and simultaneously "a huge rise in demand for semi-public spaces that can be informally appropriated to ad-hoc workspaces". This shift, he thinks, amounts to the biggest change in architecture in this century. In the 20th century architecture was about specialised structures—offices for working, cafeterias for eating, and so forth. This was necessary because workers needed to be near things such as landline phones, fax machines and filing cabinets, and because the economics of building materials favoured repetitive and simple structures, such as grid patterns for cubicles.

The new architecture, says Mr Mitchell, will “make spaces intentionally multifunctional”. This means that 21st-century aesthetics will probably be the exact opposite of the sci-fi chic that 20th-century futurists once imagined. Architects are instead thinking about light, air, trees and gardens, all in the service of human connections. Buildings will have much more varied shapes than before. For instance, people working on laptops find it comforting to have their backs to a wall, so hybrid spaces may become curvier, with more nooks, in order to maximise the surface area of their inner walls, rather as intestines do. This is becoming affordable because computer-aided design and new materials make non-repetitive forms cheaper to build.

Who needs a desk?

The effect already reaches far beyond university campuses and is causing upheaval in the commercial-property industry. Debra Moritz, a director at Jones Lang LaSalle, a firm that helps companies to manage their office buildings and consults on property investments, says that the total area devoted to traditional office space has begun to decline, although slowly. This is because “inefficiency is more obvious as workers become mobile,” she says. According to Jones Lang LaSalle's research, workers are at their desks, on average, less than 40% of their time (Ms Moritz ditched her own desk long ago). This does not mean that office space will drop by 60%. But it does mean that office designers are thinking about using space better.

There will be more “on-demand spaces” and “drop-in centres”, says Ms Moritz, with flexible layouts that facilitate collaboration. Within a typical office building, the area devoted to solitary work, such as the cubicles immortalised in Dilbert cartoons, will shrink. Internal walls and furniture are becoming movable. More space is given to communal areas, some of which are distinguished not by their function but by their etiquette—loud or quiet, say—as in libraries.

A particularly striking example, bordering on caricature, is the so-called Googleplex, the headquarters of Google in Mountain View, California. Naturally it has Wi-Fi coverage. But the Googleplex is famous for its good and free victuals, doled out at food courts throughout the sprawling campus, and for the casual mixture of play and work. Over here a software engineer is writing some code on his laptop, sweaty in his workout clothes from the volleyball game in progress on the lawn. Over there another one is zipping along on a scooter, heading for a massage or going to pick up his laundry from the onsite service. Google even extends this workspace, virtually, throughout the entire San Francisco Bay Area by running a fleet of commuter shuttles, all of which have Wi-Fi on board to allow uninterrupted coding.

Some traditional property developers are drawing inspiration from this sort of thing. Nomadism is “not good for the office industry” as such, concedes Robert Dykstra, who has been developing commercial property for 27 years. He, however, has spotted an opportunity. His new office park in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a dilapidated city that hopes to take some service-sector jobs from nearby Chicago and Detroit, is unlike any traditional office and “more like a community centre”. Instead of renting to corporate tenants, says Mr Dykstra, he plans to sell memberships as a club does—by the hour, week or month—to nomads dropping by. Mobile workers come in, find all the services they might need—from tech support to copying—and satisfy their needs for “work, love and play” as well, with the aid of fitness studios, restaurants, cooking classes and music rooms.

This “flexibility is what separates successful spaces and cities from unsuccessful ones,” says Anthony Townsend, an urban planner at the Institute for the Future, a think-tank. Almost any public space can assume some of the features of a Googleplex or a Stata Centre. For example, a not-for-profit organisation in New York has turned Bryant Park, a once-derelict but charming garden in front of the city's public library, into a hybrid space popular with office workers. The park's managers noticed that a lot of visitors were using mobile phones and laptops in the park, so they installed Wi-Fi and added some chairs with foldable lecture desks. The idea was not to distract people from the flowers but to let them customise their little bit of the park.

Third places

The academic name for such spaces is “third places”, a term originally coined by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book, “The Great, Good Place”. At the time, long before mobile technologies became widespread, Mr Oldenburg wanted to distinguish between the sociological functions of people's first places (their homes), their second places (offices) and the public spaces that serve as safe, neutral and informal meeting points. As Mr Oldenburg saw it, a good third place makes admission free or cheap—the price of a cup of coffee, say—offers creature comforts, is within walking distance for a particular neighbourhood and draws a group of regulars. The eponymous bar in the television series “Cheers”, “where everybody knows your name”, is an example.

Mr Oldenburg's thesis was that third places were in general decline. More and more people, especially in suburban societies such as America's, were moving only between their first and second places, making extra stops only at alienating and anonymous locations such as malls, which in Mr Oldenburg's opinion fail as third places. Society, Mr Oldenburg feared, was at risk of coming unstuck without these venues for spreading ideas and forming bonds.

No sooner was the term coined than big business queued up to claim that it was building new third places. The most prominent was Starbucks, a chain of coffee houses that started in Seattle and is now hard to avoid anywhere. Starbucks admits that as it went global it lost its ambiance of a “home away from home”. However, it has also spotted a new opportunity in catering to nomads. Its branches offer not only sofas but also desks with convenient electricity sockets. These days Starbucks makes bigger news when it switches Wi-Fi providers—it dropped T-Mobile for AT&T in February—than when it sells a new type of coffee bean. Bookshops such as Barnes & Noble are also offering “more coffee and crumbs”, as Mr Oldenburg puts it, as are churches, YMCAs and public libraries.

But do these oases for nomads actually play the social role of third places? James Katz at Rutgers fears that cyber-nomads are “hollowing them out”. It is becoming commonplace for

Illustration by Bell Mellor



a café to be full of people with headphones on, speaking on their mobile phones or laptops and hacking away at their keyboards, more engaged with their e-mail inbox than with the people touching their elbows. These places are “physically inhabited but psychologically evacuated”, says Mr Katz, which leaves people feeling “more isolated than they would be if the café were merely empty”. That is because the “physical presence of other human beings is psychologically and neurologically arousing” but now produces no reward. Quite simply, he says, we have not evolved biologically to be happy in these situations.

Many café-owners are trying to deal with this problem. Christopher Waters, the owner of the Nomad Café in Oakland, regularly hosts live jazz and poetry readings, and actually turns off the Wi-Fi router at those times so that people mingle more. He is also planning to turn his café into an online social network so that patrons opening their browsers to connect encounter a welcome page that asks them to fill out a short profile—as they would on [Facebook](#), say—and then see information about the people at the other tables.

Most nomads are very open to this sort of thing. Technology aside, there is not such a big difference between a geek with earphones and a laptop today and a Paris existentialist watching the world go by at the café Les Deux Magots in the 1950s. The first might be simultaneously instant-messaging, listening to music and e-mailing, the other puffing a Gitane and jotting down notes about being and nothingness. But as soon as an attractive new customer breezes in, both will instantaneously realign their focus of interest.

As more third places pop up and spread, they also change entire cities. Just as buildings during the 20th century were specialised by function, towns were as well, says Mr Mitchell. Suburbs were for living, downtowns for working and other areas for playing. But urban nomadism makes districts, like buildings, multifunctional. Parts of town that were monocultures, he says, gradually become “fine-grained mixed-use neighbourhoods” more akin in human terms to pre-industrial villages than to modern suburbs.

Ms Moritz at Jones Lang LaSalle is already counting more offices leaving suburbs entirely and moving back into downtowns, which tend to be younger and hipper. This helps to revitalise city centres. Paul Saffo, the forecaster, sees a simultaneous movement to “charismatic exurbs”, such as Mendocino on the Californian coast or Cape Cod in Massachusetts, where incoming nomads are building “consensual communities” with lifestyles reminiscent of the Utopia movements of earlier times. The big losers, Mr Saffo thinks, are the suburbs that were built for specific functions in a previous era but are now blighted.

The same trend is also changing traffic patterns. Alan Pisarski has been researching urban movement for three decades and has written a series of three books called “Commuting in America”—the first in 1986, the others one and two decades later. He is now working on the fourth. Thanks to the ten-year intervals, Mr Pisarski claims he has been able to capture the biggest trends. In 1986, before the era of mobility and at the dawn of the PC era, he still observed “the classic diurnal flow” of the post-war commuting pattern, which had baby-boomers sitting in traffic jams at 8am and 5pm between the suburbs and the downtowns. In 1996 he saw a new “circumferential pattern” as jobs shifted to the suburbs, so the baby-boomers were now sitting in jams “on the beltways”. At the same time he already noticed that the fastest-growing group was telecommuters.

Things started looking very different in his 2006 book. Younger workers were now joining the baby-boomers in the workforce. Car trips had stopped increasing and were even declining in cities such as Seattle, Atlanta and Portland. Traffic was still heavy but now

spread out over much longer periods, starting at 5am and lasting till noon, say. Bizarre new patterns were cropping up, such as a “reverse commute” in Seattle as lots of male computer scientists at Microsoft in the suburb of Redmond raced downtown to find females—a weekday ritual called “the running of the programmers”.

The current data, for use in the next book, are telling Mr Pisarski something else again. The baby-boomers are starting to retire, forcing employers to compete for new talent by letting younger employees work wherever they please. Even the older workers are becoming nomadic (Mr Pisarski himself is 70 and works from his BlackBerry and laptop). Traffic congestion, though still bad, is for the first time not getting worse. Car-pooling, which “green” city governments are still encouraging, is declining sharply as commuting times and directions are becoming more diverse and more complex.

Indeed, even though there are as many cars on the roads as ever, they are now making very different journeys. In the previous decade trips followed a “radial pattern”, says Mr Pisarski, as both office workers and telecommuters ran errands away from their workplace and back again in order to check their voice messages and faxes. Now people are making trips in a “daisy-chain” pattern, he says. Nomads set off in the morning to drop off the kids at school and then spend all day hopping from one third place to another, with stops at the gym, the post office and so on. Throughout the day they remain connected to colleagues and family members who are elsewhere, and increasingly their movements form no discernible collective pattern at all.