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## Wide open spaces

*Walls come down, offices turn inside out*

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By Robert Celaschi

Long a symbol of corporate success, the corner office is disappearing. New floor plans provide fewer “hard” offices for the top brass, and the offices that remain tend to be smaller.

Chalk it up to a combination of egalitarianism, environmentalism and plain old thriftiness.

For decades management got the prime spots, set apart from people further down the organizational chart.

“Today we find that that particular criteria is quickly disappearing,” said Hilton Williams, principal at Forrar Williams Architects in Sacramento. “The management is more integrated and more in touch with the staff that support them.”

That means a more open environment with support staff along the perimeter while the management sits at the office core. They might sit at workstations now instead of offices, and the remaining offices are likely to have a lot more glazing instead of opaque walls.

“Anytime you have transparency, it is considered to be friendly and open. You use that glass to say to your staff, ‘I’m part of you, I just need a little privacy,’ ” Williams said.

### **Fashion following form**

When ICF-Jones & Stokes moved to downtown Sacramento in April, it decided on smaller private offices and fewer of them.

“We were a little fearful of that, honestly,” said Steve Centerwall, regional leader. But the company decided there was little point in keeping big offices for managers who spend a lot of their time out meeting with clients. Centerwall himself oversees five offices in the region and spends a lot of time making the rounds.

Other forces of the new design: With fewer office walls blocking the way, more natural light pours into the center of the office. That’s environmentally friendly and saves on

lighting costs. Such a design made a big difference for the California Restaurant Association, which in May opened its new headquarters in the U.S. Bank Tower in downtown Sacramento.

“It was huge for the morale of the staff and the ambiance of the environment. You don’t walk in and just see flanks of offices,” said Rob Finley, senior vice president.

The HLA Group Landscape Architects & Planners created a similar arrangement in its midtown offices.

“Being able to see out is huge,” said John Nicolaus, the principal who headed up the office planning. “Being able to see the trees moving in the wind — or how smoky the air is,” he said, referring to the blanket of smoke that recently covered the Sacramento Valley.

People still need private places to gather, so meeting rooms take on more importance. Instead of two conference spaces for every 100 employees, there might be as many as 10 spaces, Williams said.

The restaurant association put its large break room in the coveted corner spot. During the day, staff gathers there for lunch and for meetings, and at night it can become a room for special functions.

Smaller gathering places are often scattered around.

“Most exchange of information in the office is not going on in the conference room anymore,” said Therese Kingsbury, president of office furniture supplier Miles Treaster & Associates. Designers are adding small “touchdown” places where small groups can huddle for a quick confab.

### **Extreme makeovers**

When it comes time to furnish the new office, companies are looking for products that are easy to reconfigure as needs change.

“The partitioning of space has evolved into more of an open space, where flexibility is key, where certain pieces of furniture are movable,” said Bill Yee, president of Western Contract Furnishers. “You don’t have to call in a complete installation team to disassemble or contract a space.”

The cubicle hasn’t gone away, but it’s taking on a new look.

“If you look at the physical choices we now have to configure that space, they are becoming a lot more fun. We can put in transparent panels, translucent panels. We can put in more color,” Williams said. “We have these cubicles now that have seven-foot walls but the last five feet of them are glass. We also have little doors we can put on them to lock them.”

Flat-screen computer monitors are eliminating the deep corner piece required for cathode ray tubes. Desks can be narrower, and workers don't have to sit with their backs to the cubicle openings, Yee said.

Panel heights are changing as well, often lower among people who work in the same unit, and higher around the perimeter of a team.

"Overall the panel heights have definitely been coming down. There is more of a need for collaboration in the office now. There is so much information being passed around now," Kingsbury said.

With the proliferation of electronic devices, power outlets and data connections are being placed up higher where they are easier to reach.

Furniture also might do double duty, such as file cabinets that can serve as work surfaces or furniture that includes storage space. For its finance department ICF-Jones & Stokes chose a workstation design with a half-round side table on rollers.

"If they need to get together on a project, they just grab their side table and turn it around and create a round table," Centerwall said.

"Green" practices are becoming more popular. In addition to letting in more light, offices are using a larger percentage of natural and recycled materials. The restaurant association picked a product called Vetrazzo that embeds shards of recycled glass in its line of countertops.

"One of them is recycled clear glass, and the other is recycled beer bottles, and it fits very, very well," Finley said.

Renewable sources such as wool are regaining popularity over manmade nylon, said Camille Horton, an interior designer and space planner who specializes in small and medium-size businesses.

Bamboo and cork flooring are getting popular — HLA has some of the latter.

### **Tech revolution**

Advancements in electronics have changed both the look of the office and how people decide on it.

Wireless Internet service and Internet-based telephones can cut down on hard wiring and make designs more flexible, Williams said. While paper is still a big part of the office, many documents can now be stored electronically.

"Today there isn't an office we are doing that doesn't have that smart backbone that supports video and audio communication, both in group settings and individual settings," Williams said.

Where such communications are crucial, such as deposition rooms in a law office, designers might pay special attention to lighting and sound systems.

New technology also can present some hurdles, which in turn can become business opportunities. One example is the reflective window coatings that keep the heat out.

“That also does a great job of reflecting away all the wireless signals that are trying to get in the building,” said Lou Martinage, director of product marketing for MobileAccess in Vienna, Va. His company sells and installs fiber-optic systems to bring the wireless signals inside buildings and distribute them throughout the offices.

“We always joke about putting in wires to make wireless work,” he said. The universal systems also can help avoid the “antenna farm” look of ceilings sporting too many access points serving a variety of carriers.

Martinage is not predicting an end to wire connections on the office desktop.

“Folks still want to have the fall-back of a wired connection. You will still see at least one phone jack and Ethernet drop in each work space,” he said.

Another influence of technology is helping companies quickly get a grasp on what they want out of a new design.

“I have clients coming to me much more educated than they used to,” Horton said. “They can go online and get product information, specs. It has really streamlined things.”

Manufacturers are encouraging it, she added, because they don’t have to use up as much money and paper on brochures.