



21st-Century Work Habitats

A conversation with Gensler

One of a series of collaborations between Herman Miller, Inc., and leading architecture and design firms

Knowledge work environments—or “white collar” workplaces, as we used to say—have been around since offices grew out of the factories of the Industrial Revolution. In the past 50 years, these work environments have become more purposeful and sophisticated, geared to the various kinds of knowledge workers (almost 80 percent of all workers in North America) that populate them. They have also become less one-dimensional: Now they are as much social and collaborative networking sites as idea processing centers.

What new challenges are rising for the industry that designs knowledge work environments? How does the infinite mobility of today’s knowledge workers bear on the design of knowledge work environments? How are today’s designers of knowledge work environments responding to multiple generations in the workplace, the ever-changing nature of technology, the pervasive need to attract and retain talented employees, and the spiritual and emotional needs of people working together in organizations? What can organizations do to improve knowledge-work habitats and inspire the design teams that create them?

To get some answers to these questions, Herman Miller talked to four Chicago-based designers from the well-known architecture and design firm Gensler. Here is what they had to say.

Herman Miller: What are the most important issues defining the design of workplaces today?

Carlos Martinez, principal: One thing that is very clear about today’s workplaces is the need for collaboration. I can work anywhere—at home or in a hotel—but I can’t do all of my work alone. This isn’t new, but there’s no way for real innovation to happen without collaboration. The only way we can support collaboration is to create places where people can come together.

Herman Miller: Has the nature of collaboration changed since the 1950s when people gathered to work together in offices?

Martinez: Well, I’d say that those offices were all about creating a tool to support work—those classic pictures of rows of desks—to support an assembly-line-like way of working.

Todd Baisch, principal: It was really a much more hierarchical world then. The work flowed down from one person to the next. Fewer people were collaborating in the sense that we think of that term today.

Kate Davis, senior associate: There was also less stratification in age. The younger generations today—Gen X and the Millennials—constantly push interaction and access. In the 1950s, it was really heads-down work, process, working in sequence.

Herman Miller: Do clients worry about the effects of generational differences on the design of workplaces?

Baisch: In the last year or so, they ask about it all the time. Work styles vary at different levels in their organizations. The tight job market is forcing organizations to pay attention to the ways younger people like to work and what makes them productive.

Jason Hall, associate: I agree, the competition is getting more intense.

Herman Miller: Are you as designers more involved in understanding and planning for your clients' businesses than you've been before? Are you called on to act as recruiters through your workplace design?

Hall: It's not just about recruiting, it's telling a story about an organization and who they are—telling it in a physical way, clearly and meaningfully communicated to every person who walks in. This is new.

Martinez: Yes, people are realizing the power of the environment in supporting organizational goals like recruiting. We have to create an environment that conveys information—about an organization, its work, its achievements.

Herman Miller: Does working with clients these days require you to do more research into the brand and character of client organizations?

Martinez: I wouldn't say there is more urgency to do this—

Hall:—right, we've always done this kind of exploration—

Martinez:—but we don't leap into discussion of materials or finishes. We begin with trying to understand who they are, what they do, what kind of culture they have. More than ever we need to determine what kind of environment will crystallize or summarize all that information.

Baisch: Or update them. Some clients' environments have them stuck in the 1980s, and we need to help them free up their employees to work better.

Martinez: They might have a great website or great printed pieces, but you walk into their environment, and it's way out of date.

Davis: People are so much more savvy about brand and their ability to associate other qualities with brand. It's not just about the name of a brand on a product; it's about the content of everything. It's not just about image—people want to know the story about why a space looks and functions as it does. Even for the most junior staff member, the workplace is going to become a differentiator.

Herman Miller: How do you go about finding what a client's culture or brand is? What should clients expect of their architects?

Hall: People have more expectations about physical space. They're coming to us with clear ideas about their culture and brand. We still ask them questions and guide them through a discussion. Now they can answer more easily.

Martinez: You also have to pursue the information in different ways. Every client is different. You have to ask them, and they have to confirm what you hear—more in an anthropological fashion. We have actually worked with anthropologists who do ethnographies to determine an organization’s culture. But you also have to observe and connect what you hear and what you see. I’ve been in meetings where a client will describe an amazing dynamic culture—but that’s not what I see. Their perceptions and realities don’t match. We have to triangulate information. Look, listen, and discuss—these three things will usually get at the truth.

Herman Miller: Are clients more educated about design these days?

Martinez: It depends. Some might be aware. But, for example, when we talk about color, we do so in terms they can understand—this color represents your products or your culture. So that the idea of the color comes from them. I think, as an industry, design has learned how to connect with clients, and now we are really aware of the things that matter to them and we can talk about them together.

Herman Miller: Besides an increased demand for innovation, more competition for talent, changes in perceptions of brand—are any other larger forces affecting your clients that you end up confronting in the design for a space?

Davis: It’s still about change.

Martinez: It took us forever to provide 30-inch surfaces, and now no one needs them. It’s all flat screens and laptops. Accounting for change is tough for us—how do you design something to last but that can also flex as technology or other factors change?

Hall: For a large client I worked with we designed an underlying planning structure that allowed change to happen and the space to change. So we talked less about the actual solution and more about the activities that would happen in the space. It’s a different way of thinking about a project.

Davis: I think the key is breaking it down into components—not about workstations and offices—but the elements that have to be fixed and what can change. It’s not about drywall or demountable walls. It’s about universality. We design a space that will work for a client say 5 years out at 7 percent growth, 20 years out at 15 percent growth—it’s understanding the numbers and the model behind them.

Herman Miller: Are there dimensions of the human condition that aren’t going to change?

Davis: Maybe. People still have hangups about space. We can only push people so far toward flexibility. People are afraid of change and loss. It happens all the time. I ask people what they’re concerned about, and they say their office is too noisy. When I walk in, it’s like a tomb in there. They’re really saying they’re afraid that when they move to open plan things will be noisy. It’s about the psychology of it.

Baisch: I think the younger generations don’t have as much fear about working differently.

Martinez: Some patterns of behavior in younger people point in different directions. They’re more afraid to be isolated, because they will fail unless they can collaborate. In some companies it is a challenge—younger people are put in private offices and they don’t like it. They actually want to be in open plan—and they’re used to concentrating in very distracting environments. I think we are going to be designing spaces that are extremely diverse. I think a good workspace will be like a town with an interesting character—it will not be like Levittown—it will be Boston or London.

Herman Miller: Will office furniture disappear in the next 20 years?

Baisch: I don't think so.

Martinez: I think it will be a collection of products. I think the European dislike of systems is a sign of the future.

Herman Miller: Will the volume of space organizations require shrink?

Martinez: No, I think it will just be reallocated to more public space. Private space will become simply part of a larger workspace.

Hall: When you look at the numbers, private space might shrink, but collaborative space is always going up, always. Doubling or even tripling in some cases.

Baisch: The variety of spaces—given the four generations at work—is also important. You need that for a social space.

Davis: A client in Iowa told me an interesting anecdote. A CEO was asked by an employee how big the employee's new workstation was going to be. The CEO said quickly, "40 acres." The new building was sited on 40 acres, and it belonged to everybody—you could work wherever you want. This is a great shift in thinking from the Boomers, who are so territorial about space.

Herman Miller: Do you think offices will become more social centers—places where employees can connect and build relationships?

Martinez: We are seeing clients who see socializing as an activity of work. We are being asked to provide for social behavior at work. One of our clients saw that the only real value their space had in the eyes of employees was as a place where people could meet and be together. Otherwise, the employees did not need to be in the office. So how can the space make it more likely that people would meet and connect?

Davis: But this client went beyond having a cool space—which they got—there was a huge tactical component to their change. They centralized services, made things immediately available when you walked in the door—everything people needed to do their work was at hand, right at the front door.

Herman Miller: Do you have a client that pushes you into new things? Breaks the mold and urges you to do the same?

Hall: We have a lot of them. We have one who is dealing with all the things we've been talking about and is trying to create workplaces that morph—using the kind of products that will allow that—at will.

Martinez: More often than not, our clients expect at least some degree of knowledge and future orientation from us. They expect us to take them to a new place. They are signing a lease for 5 or 10 years, and they want us to position them for the end of the lease—not the beginning.

Baisch: A communication company we've already mentioned pushed for a planning framework that would help change become easier. They wanted to make workstations so much smaller that we insisted on another place to sit for every employee—this really increased collaborative space and acknowledged that people work in different places.

Herman Miller: Next year will be the 40th anniversary of the first systems furniture—Action Office. Are we likely to see another huge change like that in workspaces in the next decade or so?

Hall: I'd like to say yes. I'd really like to see something that revolutionary. I don't know what it would be, but I would love to be involved in something that groundbreaking.

Baisch: I think it will have something to do with technology. Think what it will be like when we don't have to worry about power cords.

Martinez: I think things are going to change dramatically. Like Jason, I'd like to be part of a huge change. When you look at architecture, there's always a relationship between the interior and what happened in architecture the decade before. Five years ago, architecture was in a crisis—of ideas—everything was artificial. Today we're going through a major shift in architecture—there's great excitement about architecture, and the general public is engaged in the discussion. Out of all this, I believe something will rise that will affect interiors. What that is—it's hard to tell.

Baisch: I hope we will stop seeing rectilinear floorplates that came about from the efficiency of the grid of workstations.

Martinez: Right, and I think the enthusiasm over 120-degree planning is an indication that clients are looking for new ways of thinking and creating work spaces. 120-degree planning lets some clients match their counterculture expectations with a new kind of reality. Something will grow out of that—perhaps anarchy in planning. The irony is that systems furniture started with 120-degree planning!

Herman Miller: What about the much heralded demands of the Millennial Generation, as expressed in the phrase “playlist generation.” Will organizations have to offer 20-somethings the opportunity to create their own work habitat?

Martinez: Forget about what they want to work in—they will be the ones designing work spaces in a few years. It will be interesting to see what comes out of that.

Davis: You're right, these people are used to creating their own thing, but they do that in set parameters—everything's off the shelf. They don't create their own music, they create their own compilation of existing music. I wonder if we'll see a greater variety of off-the-shelf designs and componentry.

Herman Miller: What questions should clients ask their design team so that they end up with a work habitat that will serve them well into the future?

Davis: Some of the most successful projects happen because either organically or with great intent the end users have been engaged in a meaningful way—either a facility person who had a vision, or a series of conversations with key users. In engagements like that, the line between us and them disappears. It's not about us designing solutions—it's about a collaboration resulting in a design done both by the client and Gensler. That's the kind of meaningful engagement I would look for as a client. It's difficult. It adds time and work, but it's well worth it.

Martinez: When I was a young designer, I was asked to meet with a client. I took my portfolio, projector, and all of that stuff. We got there and were getting ready to explain to the client who we were, what we had done, and so on. The client stopped me and said, “If I needed to know what you've done and who you are, you wouldn't be here.” That shocked me. This client had done his research, knew whom he wanted to work with, and was ready to get on with the relationship and the project. That was a really good client. I wish presentations could become five-hour meetings. The client is really trying to understand who you are as a thinker, what is the chemistry of the team. Who would agree to a consulting relationship with McKinsey&Company or Boston Consulting after a silly 30-minute interview?

Herman Miller: Max De Pree, author of *Leadership Is an Art* and former Herman Miller CEO said, “You don’t hire a building, you hire an architect.”

Martinez: I think one important issue that will continue to define our work and organizations is the question of corporate responsibility. There are really important forces that will form design—authenticity, what’s real, what’s genuine—and will certainly affect the work environment.

Herman Miller: How do you as a designer prepare for your clients’ futures?

Martinez: Being aware of cultural changes—that is important to me. The only way to do that is to be immersed in all sorts of things. *Fast Company* is a great resource because it creates connections among all sorts of things. Designers are horrible linear thinkers, but we are amazing dynamic thinkers. We can make the connections.

Davis: Here at Gensler there are 2,600 people at my disposal to learn from. I’m allowed to learn from them in an organic, ad hoc, story-telling kind of way. I enjoy this subculture and connectivity—that’s how we’re all really learning. And this is in addition to more formal information sources—publications, seminars.

Baisch: I am learning a great deal from an informal group of six of us design leaders—so that if one of us is involved in a project, then all six of us are involved. There’s an amazing strength in that. The interdependence and trust that comes along with this group are really empowering. That’s a great source for knowledge.

Hall: I don’t think you become a better designer by sitting at your desk 16 hours a day reading architectural journals. I think you become better by going out and living in the world and engaging with people—looking, observing, seeing the way people live. It’s not about who can spout off the most facts about the latest building in Shanghai, it’s about recognizing and supporting the ways people live.

Gensler is a 40-year-old international architecture and design firm with offices in 28 cities around the world and more than 2,000 employees.