

Civil servants need workspace to deliver policy value

We cannot afford to house government officials in 1970s dinosaur offices, argues Sherin Aminossehe

Design guidelines, building schools for the future, hospitals, offices, new communities and homes; pages upon pages have been filled in magazine and newspaper columns within the building press, citing government views on design quality and how its policies affect the built environment around us. However, very little is ever said about how it impacts the working lives of those in Whitehall and other parts of the country where civil servants work.

We are fortunate to occupy some of the most magnificent buildings in the capital, designed by architects including Aston Webb, George Gilbert Scott, Inigo Jones, Charles Barry and more recently Terry Farrell and Norman Foster. Outside London, the list is equally impressive with departments working in buildings by Make in Birmingham and Allies & Morrison in Manchester.

But does good design permeate the thick stone walls of civil service buildings? Are the corridors of power still reminiscent of 19th century gentlemen's clubs? Does government practise what it preaches? *'Working Without Walls'*, published in 2004, was the first government publication that showcased what the public sector had been doing. Written and researched by some of my own current colleagues, it also talked about the cultural and physical challenges facing the government and the civil service and highlighted some of its early successes such as the Treasury building (where the Government Property Unit currently resides) and the Ministry of Defence.

Four years later, *'Working Beyond Walls'* started with the following call to arms from civil service chief Gus O'Donnell: 'Work is what you do, not a place you go. The next generation of workforce will know that and be ready and able to work anywhere. Work has migrated beyond the conventional boundaries of time and space into a wider environment and those who manage the government estate need to be prepared.'

This second publication reinforced the message and imagined what the government workplace of the future would look like in 2020. But what has happened in the interim? Are we nearer to the utopian vision?

In most departments, civil servants work more flexibly, share desks, have moved out of cellular offices and into open-plan, bright, well-designed environments.

However in these days of austerity, large deficits and budget cuts, this isn't enough. Design and the buildings that it transforms need to become enablers of change that not only deliver those much sought after savings, but also transform the way government and the civil service actually work.

We are reviewing our estate, though the consolidation plans for government offices being agreed with departments in various parts of the country are not about slash and burn, but about reviewing the role of buildings that do not always perform in the way we need them to. This strategy will result



in the setting up of cross-departmental hubs in existing buildings that recognise the need to improve what we have, creating efficiencies and value as well as exploring new ways of working between departments co-located in the same buildings.

This will require a combination of good design plus a common security and IT platform. Our work with Vodafone, with enthusiastic support from the Department for Business Innovation & Skills and the Department for Transport, is examining through a pilot study how the government could achieve a fully ICT-integrated workplace, which promotes flexibility through new ways of working.

The study will show how such changes might be implemented, indicating the risks and benefits, indicative costs and budget requirements and likely timescales. Most importantly it is as much about the people as it is about their workspace.

A design vision is what brings all these elements together. A vision that understands that in order to have a joined-up policy that brings several different areas together, those people should have the ability to share the same space free of artificial constraints.

But what would this look like?

When asking such fundamental questions, it's important to think what kind of place we want to create. For me, a point of inspiration has been the creative world of advertising agencies and the start-up Internet companies of the 1990s who were always ahead of the workplace trend. They realised that their

employees performed better in a well thought-out and well-designed work environment. Quite often these spaces were created on relatively small budgets that were stretched to provide what was needed for them. Quirky, distinctive places that allowed them to think differently and at the same time showcase their approach to their clients -- a window onto their world.

So why shouldn't we do the same? The work of civil servants is not really understood by the outside world, but from my few months working as one I have realised that it's not a linear, straightforward process.

Take policy formulation for example: it should not be undertaken in isolation by one person beavering away in a corner office cut off from the world. It should be a collaborative process, with colleagues from other departments. Being stuck in one building with only others from the same department is not conducive to creating the right kind of environment. There should be flexibility to go from floor to floor, from building to building as the work demands, with agile working and collaborating in touch down and break out spaces that inspire, rather than drab environments, with grey carpet tiles, monotonous pink fabric padded temporary partition walls or suspended ceilings like a set from the TV series, *'Life on Mars'* with spaces, which no light has permeated since the 1970s.

A workplace survey by the international design firm, Gensler, suggests we spend approximately a third of our time working collaboratively. Does it not make it more important



that spaces be tailored to the work that goes on in them? The British Council for Offices report on design and productivity in 2006 says that in top-performing companies, networking between departments and units, collaboration is even more highly valued; the quality of the workplaces is 13 points higher than those who were less effective. It states, 'Good places for work start with basic functionality and support of human needs. The quality of attributes such as light, air, furniture, and space layout contributes to a workplace that is sustainable, ergonomically sound, and flexible.' I would go one step further. Why shouldn't these places be joyous and beautifully detailed? Why should we not take our cue from the TBWAs, Pixars, Googles or Vodafones? Is it cost?

It is of course a common misnomer that good design costs money; we are out to prove that it actually saves it. The British Council for Offices report on design and productivity in 2006 concluded that improving office space 'can increase levels of productivity by a quarter, reduce absenteeism, help retain staff, encourage communications and the flow of ideas between individuals and departments and ultimately increase profitability'. Moreover, the budget for these improvements can come out of money that has been saved through consolidating the government's civil estate, making buildings fit for purpose so that they can become more efficient, thereby prompting further consolidation and more savings.

In the end, policy decisions and the way civil servants work affect us all, so can we afford not to invest in good design for the buildings from which our country is governed? ■

ABOVE: Foreign & Commonwealth Offices – architect HOK
LEFT: Cabinet Office, 22 Whitehall – conservation architect HOK



Architect Sherin Aminossehe works in the Cabinet Office