

Cubism

Thinking outside and working inside the box

By Lisa Baker

Cubism: Early 1900s European art technique popularized by Picasso and Braque depicting complex scenes as simplified planes, lines and geometric shapes.

Rubik's Cube: Three-dimensional puzzle produced by *Ideal Toys* in 1980 that challenges players to arrange sets of squares until each side of the cube is a single color.

Cubicle: Space enclosed on multiple sides with partitions.

Prairie Dogging: A phenomenon in which cubicle workers pop up to look over partition walls.

Connoisseurs of Pablo Picasso's foray into cubism have called the resulting work "simultaneously seductive and horrifying."

While cubism was revolutionary, even radical, most people found it baffling, disturbing, even surreal, having little resemblance to the world as they knew it.

Much later, in the 1980s, the Rubik's Cube was invented and it too was baffling to many. Even disturbing.

Nevertheless, cubism made the leap from art and puzzles to office space, popularized by newly formed tech companies whose rising tide of white-collar office workers needed space — quickly and on the cheap.

To install thousands of new tech workers in full-size offices — with doors — would have been catastrophically expensive to fragile new ventures. And the previously popular bullpen design had drawn criticism from workers who said the environment was too noisy and distracting.

In every way, for its time, the cubicle was perfect.

Intel Corp. liked the simplicity, and the egalitarian aspect. No competition for corner offices: Everyone was equal. Combined with muted colors and high partitions, there was little chance for bullpen-like distraction. Everyone would be absorbed in work, and productivity would be the sparkling result.

The cubicle became the staple of office design. Everyone had them: tech companies, banks, accounting firms.

It wasn't long before the complaints began. Workers noticed that while the walls offered visual shields from the more obnoxious colleagues, sound traveled through them as if they weren't there. High partitions blocked any natural light. Drab colors accentuated the depressing atmosphere. Some complained that the partitions also made it hard to collaborate with colleagues. The maze of floor after floor of identical cubes was confusing, even with the labeled alphanumeric pillars arranged to help with navigation.

Irritation gave way to hilarity with the launch of “Dilbert,” a comic about the lives and times of a cadre of sad sack cubicle dwellers.

Despite complaints and mockery, it appeared the iconic cubicle was here to stay. Inhabitants, after all, were making the best of it. Articles in business magazines suggested ways to personalize cubicles with homey décor and some workers took it to heart, posting photos of family and friends, bringing in *objets d’art* of various sorts. Others “decorated” with another ’90s innovation: Post-It notes.

Even Yahoo — the upstart, the maverick, the “fun” company — resorted to cubicles when it opened its customer service center in Hillsboro in 2005. They were brightly colored cubicles, but cubes just the same.

And then came October with the astonishing announcement: Intel was undergoing a redesign which could — wait for it — replace its infamous cube farms with Something New.

The startled reaction among other companies was palpable.

“Wow. I just don’t know,” said Ry Schwark, spokesman for Wilsonville-based Mentor Graphics. “Intel without cubicles,” he mused. “Isn’t that the second sign of the Apocalypse?”

On the drawing board: Wide open work areas similar to airline lounges with multiple computer stations that anyone can use, conversation areas with cushy chairs, small conference rooms for teamwork. The few remaining cubicles, Intel says, would be reserved for those whose tasks require them.

A prototype will be constructed this year on Hillsboro’s Intel campus. Two others will be built, one at Intel’s Santa Clara campus and one at the Chandler, Ariz., location. A final decision on design will come three months after installation of the pilot workspaces.

The new idea, Intel officials say, is fallout from Intel’s own survey in May, which found that 88 percent of its employees hated their cubes. (Actually, in company parlance, the survey results said it was “time for a change.”) More than half of the respondents said they wanted radical change rather than cosmetic measures.

Neil Tunmore, who is overseeing the change, said the company discovered its employees were working outside their habitats, er, cubicles, 60 percent of the time — in conference rooms, cafes or at home. Intel’s interpretation of the data is that its employees are finding places elsewhere to collaborate with one another — something they will be able to do in-house with the new, “flex” spaces.

Tripp Robinson, Intel’s emergency manager, is an 18-year inmate whose 6-foot-4 frame isn’t designed for cubicle life. He says he’s excited by the idea of more open space.

His biggest frustration: Cubicle walls are so tall that even at his height he can't see who's "home" and who's not, requiring him to navigate the maze to find colleagues who most often aren't there. So, often, meetings are scheduled online. Face-to-face meetings require finding communal space such as open conference rooms, which are frequently booked days or weeks in advance. The last and most common solution: taking the long jaunt to the cafeteria, where creativity competes with the clatter and chatter of mealtime.

Robinson says that because Intel's workforce is more mobile than ever — laptops, cell phones and wireless tech — no one has to be tied to the cube anymore anyway. "You can really work anywhere now," he says. Even personal storage isn't an issue anymore because most people store information online instead of in paper files. "Even if I'm a packrat online, I can access it anywhere."

But the new design isn't universally loved. Tunmore says there's been some "push-back" from Intel workers who believe the new ideas are company-speak for "we're taking your office away."

There's also the issue of the remaining cubicles for those with what Tunmore calls "heads-down" work. They're smaller than the current 8-by-6-foot cube.

Bill MacKenzie, Intel spokesman, says the space will be compensated for with new, smaller furniture and less storage space, which is often unused anyway.

No word on what employees think of smaller furniture.

If one company's experience with redesign holds true, Intel could be looking at more than a little grousing in the ranks.

Fortune magazine, in a 2006 history-of-the-cubicle *tour de force*, related a similar anti-cube revolution in 1993, when the Chiat/Day advertising agency in New York attempted a "loungy" Starbucks-like design where workers came and went but had no designated workplace. The January 2005 edition of *Architectural Review* hailed the lounge act as "prophetic" and "an exuberant playpen." But worker disaffection, according to *Fortune*, was massive: They simply stayed home and telecommuted.

But Intel isn't the first global high-tech company to re-examine its workplace.

Hewlett-Packard last year announced changes of its own along a similar theme: more "open seating and shared team spaces to increase collaboration and innovation," according to the company's press release.

But the change is not just about employee comfort — or even about encouraging collaboration. It's also about dollars.

As Cisco Systems told *Fortune* last year, open workspaces make it possible to fit more employees into less space without sacrificing morale. For Cisco, it meant 140 people could fit into a space where bulky cubicles once accommodated only 88. Hewlett-Packard's renovations

— planned for all of its offices — are expected to reduce expenses by \$230 million in their first year, according to *Fortune's* report.

While Intel stresses worker benefits as the reason behind the renovation, Tunmore acknowledges that it will mean significant real-estate savings as Intel sells off excess buildings and stops having to lease others.

Cash-savvy or no, PGE spokesman Steve Corson, speaking from a taupe-colored cube within PGE central, says cubicles have their uses. PGE, he says, uses a variety of work station designs but uses cubes where they fit the tasks at hand. Corson says he doesn't mind his personal cube, which is decorated sparsely — mostly photos of family. "Cubicles are a fact of life in the work world," he says. While most workers at PGE are understated in their choices of cube décor, some have become more daring — such as the employee whose habitat is dressed top to bottom in pink. "She's fond of pink," Corson explains.

Julie Schroeder, program manager for the sales arm of Wilsonville's Mentor Graphics, is enjoying a full-size office-with-a-door, as do most of the company's staff. Hers comprises sufficient space for a truckload of Elvis memorabilia. The clock with the swinging Elvis legs, the Elvis lunchbox, Elvis posters and the Elvis bank which belts out an Elvis tune with every deposit. At one time, there was a full-size Elvis cutout, but it seemed too much.

Schroeder revels in the space because she was once a cubie herself.

A self-described Loud Talker, she found that her fellow cubies did not appreciate being her neighbors. "Even now when I'm on the phone, people come and shut my office door. At least I have a door to shut."

Schwark, spokesman for Mentor Graphics, says that while there are a few "small group cubes" at the company's campus, most work spaces are traditional offices with doors. "A lot of people think an office is a sign of respect and autonomy and much of the base here are knowledge workers — smart people trying to noodle on problems. We built the space in the way it works for them, with lots of windows, a lovely campus with water features and wetlands. It helps them relax a bit and engage in deep thought."

Sigh.

But is there room for yoga? Answer, according to Schwark: You'll have to move your chair.

Barbara Baker, vice president for culture enhancement at Roseburg-based Umpqua Bank, says that while her company has cubicles at its corporate offices, it eliminated the feature at its branches so that managers and other bank staff could more easily mix with customers. "The managers now work out with the public — out mingling. There are shelves with computer access if those are needed." The idea, Baker says, is to enhance customer service and make staff more approachable.

However, when the task at hand, such as opening an account, involves the exchange of private financial information, there are offices for that.

Baker says she remembers when she worked in a cubicle. At the time, it was hard to imagine life outside of it, she says. “It was all about the cube. It was your identity. People would decorate them and even though the wall wasn’t a real wall, you’d start thinking about it that way. It wasn’t my favorite environment, but I stayed in my cube and did my thing.”

Now, she says, business is much more about teamwork. It requires being able to mix with team members — or, if the job is customer service, mix freely with customers.

At the very least, the changes at Intel — and other companies — might cut down on the cubicle comedy, renewed in October when Conan O’Brien visited Intel’s Santa Clara campus with a camera crew and walked the cube mazes, congratulating the company on the perfect coordination of its gray-on-gray color scheme. Told that the cubicles ensure everyone at Intel is treated equally, O’Brien dead-panned, “Yes, it makes people feel that they’re all basically the same, that there is no individuality ... no hope ... no sense that life has possibilities ... ”

With changes potentially coming in the next year, Intel’s Robinson is definitely feeling a sense of hope as he exclaims: “They’re taking down the walls!”

Top 10 Drawbacks to Working in a Cubicle

- Being told to “think outside the box” when you're in a freakin’ box all day long.
- Not being able to check email attachments without turning around to see who's behind you.
- Cubicle walls do not offer much protection from any kind of gun fire.
- That nagging feeling that if you press the right button, you’ll get a piece of cheese.
- Lack of roof rafters for the noose.
- The walls are too close together for the hammock to work right.
- 23 power cords, one outlet.
- Prison cells are not only bigger, they also have beds.
- The carpet has been there since 1976 and shows more signs of life than your co-workers.
- You can’t walk out and slam the door when you quit.

Source: Cubiclecoffee.com