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Emotional Office Design: a Movie Style Breakdown

Dedicated to the album *Business!* by Louie Zong.

Contents

	Introduction	03
1.	Happiness	06
2.	Frustration	15
3.	Anger	19
4.	Violence	21
5.	Sadness	27
	Conclusion	32
	Appendix	33

Introduction

An employee spends forty hours a week at their office. Eight hours a day for five of their days. If that employee is you then you are spending twenty percent of your week and one-third of most of your days in this one building and perhaps one space. This would be a very important building to you...

But obviously that employee is not you, thank god, because you are a high-ranking member of a powerful business that is looking into building a new office. This text is written for people like you, people who want to build a space you will never set foot in. People who want the space they build to encourage the result that they want from their workers.

For the study this book is based around, our team looked at four examples from the office landscape to see what they looked like, sounded like, felt like, and how the employees responded.

These four offices will demonstrate office design elements in action. From the walls to the floors, from the lighting to the air conditioning, your building should work for you. While the office may not encapsulate the entirety of your worker’s life, you can design it in a way that encourages or discourages emotions like happiness, anger, or sadness, at your discretion. Here’s how.

Our office design philosophy

First, we should say that this is not a study about management. We consider the management and leadership structures that are inside an office very important to the atmosphere and will mention them on occasion, but this will not be a comprehensive guide to it. What this *will* be a comprehensive guide of is physical office design.



The Initech office. Featured in the 1999 documentary *Office Space* directed by Mike Judge.



The Belko office, the location of *The Belko Experiment* in 2016 (reenactment directed by Greg McLean, same year).



The Global Credit office, the GCA, also featured in its own documentary *Clockwatchers* (1997) directed by Jill Sprecher.



The Towers and Smythe office which was tragically overtaken by the ID-7 virus. This incident was later reenacted, in the same building, in the film *Mayhem* (2017) directed by Joe Lynch.

Whether your company is at company town levels or a simple limited liability corporation just starting out, your office will be one of your lasting limbs in the world. Once you make your decisions about what your office should feel like, and therefore look like, you can put it out there to run that mission all on its own. (If you find it useful, you can even remove yourself from whatever effect your office has on your employees, “I just didn’t know this design would lead to that!”) And rest assured that your office will have an effect on your employees. As we mentioned at the beginning, with all the hours they will be spending in the office there is simply no way to escape any intentions you set with the space. Even if one employee is unaffected, or not affected in the way you want, the employee next to them might be, and that will propagate the mission of the building as well.

Your office will be an expression of your company. In the many aspects of design, you will find a way to express the company spirit.

Of course, you can put your logos on the walls and slogans on the signs, but once you identify your true mission, you can find a way to express that as well. Do you want efficiency? Fun and play? Quality work? An impersonal quality? Strictness? There will be an element of design to help you steer your office's inhabitants toward your company’s mission.

In the current design space, there are some branches of office design that are more focused on the efficiency of work or a strictly positive emotional outcome for the worker. Our team sees our goal of design as one seeking your intended result, whatever that might be. The only thing we will really be assuming about your mission is that because you are building an office you want some business work to be done inside of it. Other than that, the world is your floor plan. For the sake of time, this guide will be walking through only the three potential missions for corporate entities that we mentioned in our thesis, happiness, anger, and sadness.

1 Happiness



Happiness

Do you want your office to buzz with life? Do you want to see workers chatting casually in the halls? Do you want a kind approach to productivity? Happiness could be for you! As will be the case with all feelings, happiness is multifaceted. But we find that the key element to worker happiness is worker comfort. When the office you design makes workers mostly comfortable on its own it will make workers feel like they have the power to change any remaining elements that are inhibiting their happiness, leading to more happiness.

To help quantify this comfort we will use Jaqueline Vischer’s comfort model. Vischer breaks down comfort in the office into three tiers. Each one is necessary for the next one in some way, forming a classic hierarchy of needs. When all three levels are met, productivity and well-being will be maximized.



An ex-employee of Initech sits in the basement of the building. One of the signs behind him reads “Danger high voltage”. This is not a physically comfortable environment.

Physical comfort

The bottom tier of the comfort ladder is physical. This one is extremely simple and important; is your space habitable? To keep your employees comfortable you can under no circumstances have exposed wiring, spaces workers cannot move in, or pits of lava (just kidding). What you should have is clean air, sufficient light, temperature control, and no excessive noise (think jackhammer, not chatter). These simple aspects should also be covered in the health and safety standards held by your local government.

Two Belko employees sit on the top of a moving elevator. This is also not a physically comfortable environment.



Functional Comfort

While physical comfort may sound like ergonomics, that actually lives here. While physical comfort is your bare minimum needs, functional comfort is all the elements that make someone comfortable enough to get their work done. Not just the presence of sufficient lighting, but the quality of it. If an employee is doing very detailed work, they may want a brighter and more focused light; one that is functional for them. When work is being done, it’s important to provide workers with the opportunity to do it well so they don’t feel frustrated or sad because they can’t do the work they were hired to do.

This principle is most usefully described in vague terms here since it is so context-dependent. Functional comfort can be chairs that are made to be comfortable for long periods of sitting, but that’s only if the employee's function requires that amount of chair use. If it doesn’t then that chair doesn’t really meet the functional purpose anymore.

So, keeping it vague (with one example on the next page), some other elements that can either help or hinder the flow of work in your office are desks, floor plans, tools (their location and design), lamps, and soundproofing or lack thereof.



All of these elements can be greatly enhanced when the worker can control them. Having bright lights for doing detailed work is good. But if one day, a calmer atmosphere is desired for another kind of work, or someone has a headache, the worker will probably want to be able to turn down the lights without having to turn them off and sit in the dark.

The Belko office embraces this controllability in their personal office's

The Belko space in question with the large window on the left and the blinds (folded) in the middle.

design. If a worker in one of these offices wants to make themselves available for walk-in meetings, there is a glass window on the front of the room to allow visitors to see in, and the worker to see out. But this level of exposure is not always ideal, so Belko installed obscuring blinds to the window. This makes it so this one office can contain public, fluid work as well as a private phone call or confidential meeting. This makes it functionally comfortable

for the employee.

Unfortunately, Belko will be our only good example for functional comfort. None of other our studied offices seemed to focus on encouraging work through their design. Of course, employees got work done in the buildings, but the design didn't exactly encourage that. Cubicles, plain desks, and overhead lighting will not stop anyone from working, but it doesn't exactly kick off inspiration or productivity either. This aspect of comfort is to help work happen in a comfortable and encouraging manner so that happiness is not hindered by an employee feeling like there is something stopping them from doing their job. So, if your business actually needs to get work done while maintaining happiness, try focusing on this area!

Psychological Comfort

Psychological comfort is the emotional cherry on top of the happiness cake. From the previous two rungs of the pyramid, your employees are not in physical danger and are content that their space can help

them work how they want to. The psychological tier will help meet the feelings-y needs of your employees to truly help them thrive.

We mentioned this in the functional segment because that is where it sometimes appears, but having flexible, employee-controlled functional elements also feeds directly into the psychological comfort of the worker. When an element is flexible, workers are encouraged to interact with the environment around them. This not only makes it easier for them to work in comfort, but it increases their stake in the space. You have a very high stake in the space because it is yours. Giving workers some control over the environment helps your workers invest in the space and associate more positive emotions with it.

In the Initech office, an employee called Peter took full control of the space around him. (Even though it wasn't designed to be controllable.)



All images from the Initech office.

Above left: Peter removing a sign in the office. Sign reads “Is it good for the company?”

Above right: Peter removing a door knob that routinely gave him static shocks.

Below: Peter sitting at his cubicle desk after removing one of the walls. This gave him a better view of a window (off screen). Peter’s manager, Bill Lumbergh, looks on disapprovingly.



He took down signs, he removed door knobs, and he knocked down cubicle walls. Not only was this a way of communicating what would make him most comfortable, with these changes Peter was more willing to spend any time in the office at all. Before the flexible changes, Peter was reluctant to come into work because he really didn’t care much. But after the changes (the worker enforced flexibility), Peter knew that the space he helped cultivate would respond to him when he wanted it to. We cannot emphasize enough how important control is for workers. It makes them feel as if the space is for them (even if it isn’t).

Another way people tend to participate in the office space is by bringing pieces of themselves to it. This is an element that was present across all four of our studied offices. Workers tend to keep small and personal items, decorations, or pets in their space.

Right: Various personal affects from all of the offices.

Top left: Initech, belonging to Milton.

Top right: T&S, belonging to Derek.

Bottom left: Belko, a gift for Leandra.

Bottom right: GCA, belonging to Iris.

These elements bring these people joy and cost no money on your part. Alongside personal joy, effects special to a worker or their interest can also facilitate discussion between workers. They’re a conversation starter! This increased level of social interaction boosts the employee’s stake in the workplace as a whole, the place and the people. To encourage this behavior, keep an eye on your decor. You don’t want your office to be so plain that it leads to the worker feeling like anything they add to the space will be too conspicuous or out of place. But also don’t over decorate, as then the worker will have no space to add something of their own.





Employees at Initech attending a mandatory birthday party for manager Bill Lumbergh.

Fun

As we just mentioned, you shouldn't over-decorate to leave workers space to fill for themselves. But another element of this is the idea of mandatory fun. Posters, bean bag chairs, music. Those things are fun. But if you fill your office with company posters, all bean bag chairs, and music that plays and never stops (this particular example being from the GCA office), those elements almost automatically stop being fun because they stop being flexible. More often than not, fun features should be an option in your space but not the rule. Some workers aren't fun or aren't fun all the time, and respecting that makes them happy. When you respect everyone in the space, over time they will choose to bring themselves into the space, and it will

become decorated in ways and with things that are fun for them.

Lean

But as much as you shouldn't over-decorate, you shouldn't *lean* too much in the other direction. A lean office (lean as in little meat on the bones) is defined by its lack of decoration or personalization, its uniformity, and its clean design and management. Imagine plain, beige, white, overhead lighting, most spaces looking the same as each other and being on the same level as each other (often even in one big room). You should be picturing something like our studied offices, all of which can be defined as lean to some degree. This kind of minimalistic environment is not only less friendly for worker customization (as mentioned earlier), it is detrimental to happiness and encourages stress. In spaces like these, any employee given a private office will almost automatically fare better emotionally and productively because of the inherently adjustable nature of having a room with a door that can close.

Derek in the Towers and Smythe office and Leandra from Belko were both often able to find a break from a stressful situation in a private office. But the workers without that luxury were left for the minimalist wolves of under-stimulation and unproductivity.



Two visuals of lean offices. Above is the Belko office, below is Towers and Smythe. note the overhead lighting and repetitive design.



All together now

When these elements all stack on top of each other, your office should look like something we did not see in our study. Workers should work in spaces that are slightly unique to themselves in function and decor. There should be more than one kind of space because sometimes employees want to meet in groups and sometimes they do not. Employees should be talking to each other and giving something to the office as much as they take away. A happy office would be a very unique place indeed.

Towers and Smythe employee Derek and visitor Melanie share a moment of rest and comfort in a private office.



2

Frustration

Frustration

If the last chapter felt too soft, or you saw the index and came right here, frustration may be a goal for your office. As we said, we are not in the business of providing a good office environment, just your ideal one. Maybe you don't want your workers getting too friendly with each other. Maybe you want a high turnover rate. Maybe you want to escalate frustration into something else. Or maybe you just don't care. This is the office design for you.

Creating negativity

Our recommended strategy for frustration is to do it in small increments. Little by little, day by day. Ideally, the subject of the frustration should barely even tell that the office is the source of their feelings, and failing that, they should at least not know that something is doing it on purpose. Picture your business as,

for example, an octopus. You should picture the office as one of your arms and your employee as a flea, a minuscule thing on your arm. The workers walk to the head of the octopus, the source of their frustration (you), should be long and winding with several false heads along the way.

Opaque

To get into what your design should look like, it should be unclear or misleading. Take a look at these beautiful cubicles from the GCA office (below). Now, can you tell if these are blinds? Do you see a way to adjust them? *Should* you be thinking about adjusting them? Or again, are they blinds? Are they adjustable at all?



The answer is no. But their static design being evocative of a flexible feature is subtly confusing. More overt confusing design can be found in some technologies. A frequent sticking point in the Initech office was the copy machine. During the operation of the copier it would often jam, give error messages that the employees did not understand, and destroy items that were put into it. Confusing technologies are an excellent place for obfuscating the source of frustration because you will always have the reasoning that you did not design it and therefore you didn't mean it to be confusing, that's just the way it is! And it's also a pinch point of work. If there is only one copy machine and an employee has to copy something, they are forced to interact with an item of frustration.



Three images from the Initech office.
Left: The copy machine.
Top right: A crowded cubicle.
Bottom right: the ditch.

Discomfort

A nice pairing with confusing design is uncomfortable design. This shouldn't go so far as to dip into hazardous, per say, if you read the happiness chapter think of it as staying away from the physical comfort level of that. To help obfuscate the source of emotion, the space should not be so unpleasant that it is reportable to anyone, just inconvenient. The Initech office truly excels in this area with bright lights and an abundance of glass, but with some more key details.



Within their office, there was a situation they handled with a former employee who refused to stop coming into work. Initech's solution for this was to make that individual's space so unpleasant that they would want to leave. Day after day, incrementally, they started storing files and boxes in the individual's cubicle, making it unpleasant to be in. This strategy and ones like it can truly communicate the message that the space your worker is inhabiting is simply not meant for them, which can stoke all kinds of negative feelings. Outside Initech's office, they have an amazing touch. A nearby strip mall is a popular outlet for employees to go to for lunch. Initech has designed their landscape so in between work and food is a kind of ditch. It's a relatively nice ditch, but it nonetheless communicates that this is not your place to be walking, why are you even here?

On the management side of things, design can also be socially uncomfortable if you want to pay that much attention to your employees' dynamics.

Belko employees Leandra and Wendell were seated with direct eye lines to each other. They did not get along. Wendell is pictured to the right.



Being sat near an unpleasant co-worker, especially with direct eye lines or other ways you are made to communicate with them can be quite unsettling.

Intended effect

Please note at this point that if you feel very strongly about getting frustration and not sadness or apathy that you should be getting someone to monitor the office for that. Feeling like the space is not yours can lead to negative emotion, but it's hard to predict which one. "This space isn't meant for me, but I guess I'm stuck with it no matter how much I hate it" (frustration), "This space isn't meant for me, no one even knows I'm here"(sadness, see chapter five), and "This space isn't meant for me, oh well"(apathy) are all possible reactions to the same environment. If you care, monitor via management.

Anger

Anger

Frustration is a good element of negative emotion, but in the previously described approach it is meant to simply build, stew, go nowhere, and be more frustrating because of the nowhere that it goes. To escalate into anger or something more there needs to be a move made. For this we came up with two approaches, pressure or incite.

Pressure

The pressure strategy is simply a long game version of frustration. For this you want to keep the level of frustration in the worker rising at a constant rate. But this means you have to constantly escalate the elements causing frustration because over time frustrating elements become tolerable. The thing that differentiates “pressure” from “incite” is that the change is never very big.

Make the space louder by removing noise canceling or playing music, make the temperature more uncomfortable by one degree (as Belko did by shutting off the air conditioning at the start of their experiment), or take away more of their space one box at a time (as the Initech office continued to do for some time). This strategy is meant to continue obfuscating the source of the emotions.

Incite

The incite strategy involves a more dramatic event. Frequently, this is best done in a social way. Fire the worker, wrongly accuse them, rightly accuse them, create a dramatic instance. These

will get you excellent results. But how can you use the space to help? The Initech office has an example of pressure transitioning directly into incite with their ex-worker. They were using the lessening of space tactic for pressure, and then moved the entire cramped space to the basement as a dramatic escalation of the strategy by changing the setting of it. You can combine both paths of attack (social and physical) with higher stress environments to have your dramatic instances in. Towers and Smythe have an excellent example of this in their meeting room with a disproportionate table. This table provides an exaggeration to the already evident power dynamics of the meetings that will happen here and puts more stress into the situation.

Left: The ex-Initech employee sits in the dark in the basement.

Below: The very large table at Towers and Smythe.



Direction

What the object of this anger is can and should be controlled. Often, it will simply be the last link in the chain of how the employee is being frustrated. The person to deliver the bad news, the boxes taking up the cubicle, an unrelated stressor that turns out to be the final straw. The most important part of directing the anger is for *you* be as far away from the angry employee as possible. Many of the events that took place at Towers and Smythe only

occurred because the board of the company chose to be on site, in the building with their employees. Tragically, a board member lost his life due to employee anger. That's on the extreme end. But, generally, making things you do not want workers to be angry at physically distant from them and things you do want them to be angry at close to them is a simple way to direct anger.

But, direct it into what?

Violence

If this is your goal, you already knew it was.

A good formula that leads to violence is anger (see the last chapter) plus a focus of the anger plus a weapon to express that anger with.

Weapons

In this area, you can be as subtle or direct as you want. Many things that count as a weapon blend in as normal decor or functional items, especially in a utility area like a closet or basement (see appendix one). Across our offices we saw violence enacted with tape dispensers, pens, microphones, and many tools including but not limited to nail guns, wrenches, and different wrenches. If you want to take a more direct approach to providing workers with things they will recognize as weaponry, select items for the office that feel more obviously like a weapon. In the middle of

this gradient from office supply to obvious weapons are functional yet aggressive items like paper guillotines. Objects like this require mild tampering but then become something like a knife. Speaking of which, if you have an area with food, provide sharp knives.

Then there is the category of item that can only be a weapon. Guns are not a typical thing to have in an office, so to separate them from the normal function consider constructing a small to medium sized armory as the Belko office did. Not only will this help keep the office normal until the time of violence, it will also help the workers locate their tools of anger when violence crosses their mind. Guns, grenades, and other ballistics are the biggest escalation and should be labeled properly for ease of location for employees wanting to do heavy violence.



The small armory at the Belko office.

4

Violence

Scale of how normal it is to have in an office.

Very abnormal to have.

Normal to have.



Violence to objects

When anger and weapons are established, the question becomes where the violence produced will be directed. As we discussed earlier, you can help steer the anger, but there are really only two categories of things to be angry at that you can also do violence against, objects or people. In the case of objects, the worker is sometimes angry at the object itself, but not always.

Objects can easily be a source of frustration, especially if the object is supposed to serve a function it is not serving. This harkens back to functional comfort; having the ability to do one's job can bring happiness, having that ability interrupted can cause frustration. One such example in the Initech office was their previously mentioned copier. Its lack of functionality built an anger in the employees that needed to use it to fulfill their jobs. These employees eventually destroyed the copier in a moment of catharsis once they were given the opportunity and the means.

But on the other hand, workers doing violence to objects may not necessarily be angry at the actual objects, but what they represent. Returning to the case of the ex-employee in the basement at Initech, he had a growing hatred for the people running the company and the physical slights they were committing against him (taking his stapler, moving his desk). This ex-employee chose to burn down the Initech office as an expression of anger against many things, not only the building itself.

Violence to people

However, if an employee is very angry at a specific individual, the violence will most likely be directed at that individual or gaining access to that individual. Many of the incidents that took place in the Belko

Left: the destroyed Initech copier.

Right: the Initech building on fire.



and Towers and Smythe offices were predicated on personal grudges between employees. This area is as varied as human emotion. The design you can do here is to control how difficult it is for various groups of people to gain physical access to each other. Pinch points such as doors, hallways, and elevators that can be locked down are most helpful in these situations.

Take the incident that happened at Towers and Smythe. The building had elevators that required a key card or password to access higher floors. This system prevented aggrieved employee Derek from accessing the object of his anger for almost six hours. Without this security measure, the incident would have been much shorter.

Derek using a key card acquired via violence to access the elevator.



For comparison, the Belko office had no restriction on the elevators, freely available stairs, and almost no locked doors. In their case the only thing controlling who could do violence to who was possession of weapons. The armory was the only thing locked in the building, this created a pinch point to the guns and controlled the power dynamics. Keep an eye on who has access to where. Employees who have access to areas that can be locked will be harder to harm.

You may be thinking to yourself that objects and people are not the only things that workers can be angry at, and you are right. But, for our purposes, they are the only things workers can do violence against.

Anger against the system

One cannot commit violence against the system. The system is a network, a spider web, an octopus. A worker is simply not big enough. They are a node, a fly, a flea on the skin of these things. So do not worry. In trying to break the system, workers will



John Towers falling to his death in the Towers and Smythe office building.

most likely end up breaking objects or killing people, which can both be replaced. But keep an eye out for how this anger will be expressed against objects and people.

Expressing anger against the system by damaging objects can come in many forms, a common and specific one is graffiti. A worker may vandalize a wall or desk to make it contain a message that represents how they are feeling and to galvanize people who may see it. This course of action also contains an element of making the inflexible flexible. Despite The illegality of vandalism, it is a way to take control of the office decor.

In the case of people, individuals who represent or act for the system in some capacity may be targeted. The death of John Towers of Towers and Smythe is one of these instances. Mr. Towers was an employee-facing head of the company and member of the board who put forward

some key decisions that made a worker (Derek) angry. Along Derek’s trip up the building to gain access to Mr. Towers, Derek became angry at the way the company (read: system) was run. Mr. Towers' killing became representative of some victory over the system to Derek. It was not. Towers and Smythe are a legal firm. Their clients they were supporting were not on the premises and were not harmed. The system remains undamaged. The system cannot be changed.

All together now

If you want to see a complete vision of an office encouraging violence, look no further than the Belko office during their experiment. They had small social and physical annoyances, large social and physical threats, places to hide but nowhere that could be locked, and weapons ranging from tape dispensers to guns. These elements convey a message that is beautiful in its clarity. It tells the people in it that the easiest thing to do is to fight or be killed. When it all comes together, the natural result is a bloodbath.

Sadness

Sadness

If happiness is not the goal, and violence was a bit too extreme for you, we suggest sadness. Soul crushing, unending, heavy, heady, sadness. Sadness is quite easy to achieve and can help keep your workers in line if you take a balanced approach. It's something that can pin a worker in place emotionally, and therefore keep them in their job at your bountiful company.

Dullness

If you recall the short section on lean offices in the happiness chapter, here is the place where we want to apply all those things instead of avoiding them. Use flat colors, only overhead lighting, any pictures on the walls should be related directly to the work and they should be repetitive reminders instead of new information. The goal of this design is to provide no excitement to the space. This also

means the dullness must be consistent. There are many shapes and sizes of spaces that can achieve this effect, but you must only pick one and use it everywhere. This way, exploring the building or the floor gives no feedback to the worker. There is nothing for them to see anywhere. This dullness also necessitates the removal of personal effects if they are brought into the office, as people can bring in their own pops of color. Forbid it and remove it.

Neglect

As much as possible, the employee should get no response from the office (or management) for any actions they take. File a complaint? You get no response. Close a drawer? It pops open again. Flick a light switch? Nothing happens. Or



GCA employee Margaret struggles with a perpetually broken drawer in the filing room.

another option for situations like lights is just to have no light switches available to workers. Not being able to change something even if one wants to, even if one tries, is powerful. As you may be able to tell, this point is the antithesis of the flexible design elements that help employees thrive. Any area that we mentioned instituting flexibility in can also be a space to remove that flexibility. The employee should feel entirely disconnected from the space. As if it is impossible for them to affect the space in any way, even though they usually can (see chapter four). In its most ideal form, this physical disconnection will aid in social disconnection too, from managers and otherwise.

Removal

One of the biggest factors preventing deep sadness in a worker's life is their co-workers. Simply having another employee in the space can make a worker feel less alone and lessen their sadness. But unless you want to have an office with a single employee, you should find ways to have employees in the same space feel, as

The Initech office utilizes this classic and effective cubicle design and they have achieved a pretty disconnected office. At Initech, workers frequently gather in one cubicle to avoid walls and seek connections.



much as possible, as if the other workers are not there. The principle method for this is to physically block people from each other. Cubicles serve this function well as they block workers from each other while not giving any one so much privacy that they would start to feel comfortable. Use solid walled cubicles, not glass, obviously.

Alongside or instead of cubicles, consider facing employees away from each other. Maybe point them at an even-colored wall instead (to go back to dullness.) The point of this is that if their eyes drift while working, they should not catch another worker in their eyeline. Another step to take is to physically distance workstations from each other. Again, there should not be too much privacy or comfort, but this physical distance helps lessen the sounds employees will hear from each other, isolating them further.

If you would like to escalate this element, it moves into management strategies that can be supported by design. Full removal of key employees that may be rallying

workers together in some way will be the most effective. The GCA office handled this very effectively in the case of one of their workers, Margaret. As a temporary employee in the office, Margaret took to introducing herself to other temporary employees and formed a small social circle. None of the other employees took this kind of social initiative. So when Margaret was fired due to a situation, the circle fell apart and three employees were left feeling isolated. The effect of a single strategic firing was immense.

And, in our effort to explore every avenue that may be helpful to you, another option for removal is simply to kill them. The company can dispose of employees if it wants; if you're considering this avenue we're sure you already have a guy for that. If you want employees to dispose of each other, see chapter four.

Surveillance

And a last element to consider... If an employee truly thought they were alone, they would not be encouraged to be doing work. They might get up, take a walk, or even eat a snack, all things which can lessen sadness. To avoid this outcome of an employee feeling free instead of alone, make them think they are being watched. Unless you care, you don't even have to get someone to actually watch them. An employee simply knowing or thinking there is a microphone or camera present in the space is most of the time enough to have them self-police and refrain from too many non-work related activities.

All together now

When all these elements come together, it should be crushing. As you can tell from all the examples pulled from their office, the GCA truly put all these elements together extremely effectively. Their employees described the feeling this environment produces in a beautiful way.

A security camera is installed at the GCA office.



“Do you ever feel like you’re floating? Like you’re not connected to anything or anybody? ... I feel like I could vanish and nobody would notice for weeks.”



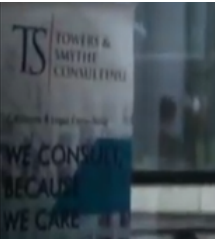
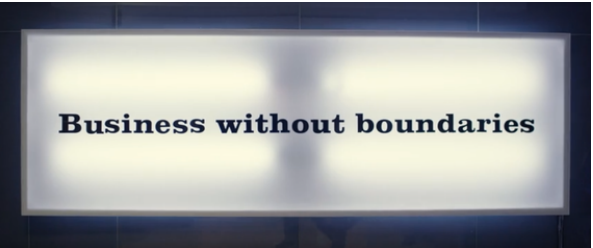
GCA employees Margaret and Iris.

Conclusion

We hope you have found this brief guide to emotion focused office design helpful. Our goal is to provide you with the inspiration you need to build an office that works for you. Our final remark and generalization to help you on your design journey will be this: the building is the work.

The Initech office is made of many separate boxes. In that building, much effort is required for employees to connect with their co-workers.

The Towers and Smythe office is a single vertical block. The work there is centered around climbing the literal and metaphorical ladder.



A Towers and Smythe sign in their office, sign reads “We consult because we care.”

The Belko office is filled with weapons. The work is to kill.

The GCA office is an empty free-for-all of resources. It is work to find ones place there.

In your company’s journey to find its place in the market, whatever sells goes, and whatever sells has to be worked on. From Y2K compliant software, to legal services, to credit, to experiments on the fragility of human morals when faced with an existential threat; if one can imagine work they want to be done in an office, then one can design a space that will fit that work like a glove.

To the left, a sign from the Belko office, sign reads “Business without boundaries.”

Authors note

If an office is simply a space designed to have someone do something in it, isn't every space an office? How well does your work office help you work? How well does your murder office help you beat someone over the head with a tape dispenser? How well does your school help you learn? How well does your home help you live?

You may not have done it yourself, but every space around you has been designed. And as was talked about in the very first chapter, the happiest spaces are the ones that the people actually in them help design. And as was talked about later, the saddest, angriest, violentist places are the ones that we cannot change.

In your life, reader, you do not know if you can change something unless you try first. Because there's a chance that some mother fucker designed something to look unchangeable to us when it is the thing that most needs to be changed.

This was all really fun to write, and it was also interesting. Mostly because there are things in here that I really do not believe. I might have taken this approach of an outside instructional voice to avoid feeling like I had to pause every once and a while to reaffirm that I don't think it should be this way. So instead I made up a little guy to be my voice in the world of evil office design.

The cadence of this guy is definitely inspired by Life of Work, one of the main readings I consumed as research and the book that the aesthetics of the piece revolve around. This guy loves making up words for stuff to make headings easier, this makes the piece on a weird line of accessible and not accessible feeling. This guy loves to think about how spaces feel. This guy doesn't talk about management as much as he should because this is a book about architecture, actually. And that's what I channeled from Jeremy Myerson.

But Jeremy Myerson is not actually evil (as far as I know). The essence of the character is inspired more by something Ralph Clare talked about in Fictions Inc, my other main reading. In a lot of movies about corporations (different from movies about offices) that Clare went over there was this idea of good capitalism and bad capitalism. If only the right person could be in charge, then everything would be okay! And

that's an interesting standpoint to me because it acknowledges that things under capitalism are not okay, while also refusing to acknowledge that capitalism could be the problem. This guy is one step away from that and just thinks all capitalism is good. All means that create any ends are probably fine in service of good business. He really ended up as just this quiet yes man of cartoonish evil. And by evil I think I mean indifference. If the line goes up, if the work gets done, then you should do it while ignoring the costs best you can.

And really, this is the only way to take all these movies seriously at once. There's really only one presupposition that can agree with all the things in these movies, including but not limited to...

- 1, Belko: locking your employees in a building and telling them to kill each other (it works),
- 2, Clockwatchers: heavy surveillance and light union busting,
- 3, Mayhem: throwing people under the bus for the good of the company,
- and 4, Office Space: normal office activity.

And that presupposition is that anything you do for the good of the business is a valid course of action. Just in case it's not clear, the stuff Belko did was good for the company because the point of the company is to study human behavior in unethical ways, so, yeah.

I guess the other presupposition is that none of it should be taken very seriously because it's movies. But that sounds boring. And trying to do it half way and take some of it seriously but not other parts sounds exhausting. So I made up a yes man that could take everything as seriously as possible to analyze all these wonderful sets on their own terms. And it truly has been a joy to pay attention to these elements and there are so many tiny details I didn't have space for. If there's one thing I like about movies it's that (if the movie is good) anywhere you look on screen, you will find something that someone thought about and put there on purpose. No one makes any kind of office by accident. And that's pretty cool.

End authors note

Please enjoy this appendix.

Appendix

Basements

Basements

A thread that we noticed in all the offices we studied is the employees experiences with basements, either in the building or in their employment history. However we did not find this to be integral to the rest of the book, so we have decided to put it here as an optional piece. Across these basements, seen and mentioned, we noticed three themes; aesthetic, isolation, and hard work.

Aesthetic

No matter what the design aesthetics of the rest of the building are, basements often look identically like a basement across offices. Bare walls, exposed lighting fixtures, lower ceilings, small windows (if any). There are often light metal shelves to hold whatever tools or materials are needed. Usually these tools are heavy like nail guns, hammers, wrenches, and hammers. There are almost never classic work stations like the desks that



are present in the rest of the building. These elements illustrate that basements often lack psychological and functional comfort elements and may even come close to losing physical comfort and becoming hazardous for untrained workers. Dark colors and dim aesthetics like this are not a positive environment for employees to be working in for long periods of time. Traditional basement decoration says to a worker that they should only be here temporarily. To grab a tool, fix an appliance, and then return to the real office above.

Above: The Towers and Smythe basement.

Right: The Initech basement.



Isolation

Even if the basement is the same elevator ride away from the first floor as the second floor, it doesn't really feel like that. It's a line that the stark difference in aesthetics between the spaces helps draw. The upper floors of the building are one body, the basement is another. In the studied offices there were either very few employees or none that were there full time. This means if you are in the basement, you are most likely alone. It is a place people and things are sent to be solitary and apart from the rest of the building. Just like we said at the beginning of the chapter, anything you put in the basement you are considering not that important, not integral, to be ignored if

The Belko office lobby compared to the basement below it.



you want. This was the case for Derek (Towers and Smythe) and Milton (Initech) who we have mentioned before. Both were fired employees at the time, sent to the basement to help denote their otherness from the workers above and isolate them.

To this purpose of isolation, other spaces can evoke a basement-like feel in different ways. For instance, even though the GCA office did not have a basement, a desk set up they imposed on some workers served a similar function. It drew a line between their space and the office space. It made them stand out and therefore isolated them. And as we have mentioned before, this separateness can cause feelings of sadness and otherness in workers.

The altered and isolating desk set up in the GCA office.



Hard work

Despite the emotional negatives and dimness of a basement, it is also a very functional place. Part of what makes the decoration the way it is and what separates the basement from the rest of the building is the presence of heavy machinery, industrial elements, and work tools that are necessary for the function of the building. The basement is the home of important foundational elements. In the Belko office, where the lights are not a flexible feature and the windows were sealed, an employee called Dani used the breakers in the basement to shut off lights where she wanted them to be shut off. Even if you make it so regular workers

Dani, the Belko worker, shutting off the lights in the building.



cannot control elements such as air conditioning or lights, these things still have to be controllable from their foundations, those foundations live somewhere, and that somewhere is the basement.

The lack of work stations like desks is often a functional comfort element because the space dedicated to work is the entire space of pipes and wiring. The basement is a much more common location for more physical and 'blue collar' work. This work more often than not requires the employee to be up and moving, thinking on the fly. Therefore a desk would not necessarily contribute to the functional comfort of a basement, except for specific roles.

Belko employees attempting to fix the air conditioning after Belko shut it off to increase discomfort and frustration.



Who's in the basement?

The aesthetics and physical contents of the basements was consistent throughout the studied offices, but which people were in the basement was the factor that led to very different results.

The Initech basement was most similar to a setup from a past job that a worker at GCA mentioned. Both basements, for the most part, seemed to just have one employee there. Working (or not working) alone. This was pretty much only a source of misery and a bad time to think back on. Iris, the worker from GCA, noted how she didn't see many other people, or meet any "cute boys" as her co-workers inquired.

Iris and her co-worker discussing the past job.



The basement of the Belko building was the only one in which we saw actual workers. Two employees called Bud and Lonny worked as a small team on the technical elements of the building. This buddy system of workers seemed to do a lot to lessen the isolating nature of the basement as they were good friends. And this status as the only two people in the basement even made Bud and Lonny more recognizable to other employees who frequently knew their names. Due to the nature of the Belko office, Lonny murdered Bud with a wrench during a moment of acute stress from the noise of a fire alarm. But before that they were very connected to each other.

The basement of the Towers and Smythe office was also a place where people were harmed. Derek (notable T&S employee) was brought to the basement to be beat up for resisting his firing. And Mellanie (notable T&S visitor) was brought there due to resisting arrest. For management at the time, the basement was functioning as a holding cell of sorts. But, despite the aggressive circumstances, it was being in

the basement together that made Derek and Melanie realize their overall goals (wanting to do violence against a board member) were aligned and start their rage-virus-induced, upward rampage through the building.



Above: Melanie helps Derek up to start their escape from the basement.

Below: Bud (left) and Lonny (right) listen to the first announcement of the test.



All together now

This section was not so much a guide as it was a noticing of an architectural pattern and a social divergence. Overall, we have found that the basement of your fine building can be a dark, different, isolated place, but it can also be a place of work, foundational elements, and connection between its inhabitants.

Image credits

All images originate from their corresponding film as established in the introduction and labeled in the captions accompanying each picture.

The pictures accompanying each chapter title are as follows.

- Happiness: The GCA office, *Clockwatchers*.
- Frustration: The Initech office, *Office Space*.
- Anger: The GCA office, *Clockwatchers*.
- Violence: The Towers and Smythe office, *Mayhem*.
- Sadness: The GCA office, *Clockwatchers*.
- Basements: The Belko office, *The Belko Experiment*.

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Mayhem. Directed by Joe Lynch, written by Matias Caruso, performances by Samara Weaving, Steven Yeun, and Steven Brand, RLJE films, 2017.

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