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## Comfort and efficiency key when designing shared workspaces

Being all things to all people underpins the design of work environments that allows time-sharing of desks and more



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Designers say comfort and efficiency are the key elements that must be kept in mind when creating office facilities to be shared by more than one firm such as the Wynd complex, which opened in Lan Kwai Fong in 2013.

As Goldilocks discovered, finding furniture that is neither too hard, nor too soft, but "just right" for one's personal liking, is a process of elimination. And especially important when you'll be spending one-third of every day upon said item.

Thus it is with office furniture. A rule of thumb is to look for pieces designed for comfort, because that, in theory, should be conducive to efficiency and, therefore, maximise a worker's productivity.

Which is fine if your workspace is just you, but what if you share that area? That set up, according to a new wave of office-space providers in the city, is an increasingly popular option in Hong Kong.

Within the co-working space concept, individuals time-share all the office accoutrements - desks, chairs, conference room and the like - in a central location. Users can "buy" time on a daily, weekly or even hourly basis, utilising the premises from early morning to well into the night.

How do designers accommodate the different body size and shapes and tasks to be performed by all these users?

Rowena Gonzales, of Liquid Interiors, concedes that shared workspaces need to be done in offices, business centres and community centres, but a shared workspace is all of these in one," said Gonzales, who, with colleague Priscilla Ho Pui-lin, designed the front-of-house at CoCoon, a 14,000 sq ft non-profit incubation business centre established in June 2012 in Tin Hau.



Designing for multifunctionality is the issue, Gonzales said. "We have to think about how one space can be used for many things."

At CoCoon, a wow-factor entry designed for visual impact also acts as a stage for product launches, seminars, and even social events. Grass-green carpeting and greenery around the windows promote a relaxing, outdoorsy-feeling.

Beyond the reception, CoCoon's founders wanted the pantry area to encourage interaction between members - a space that, as Gonzales describes it, is "part Starbucks, part library - and a place to play".

The furniture was chosen to be easily moved around, and sofas generously provided to foster an air of informality. Foosball and ping-pong tables add a bit of a social element.

Shared workspaces can never be completely quiet, and as Barbara Armstrong, a workplace design strategist in the US points out, there's a fine line between openness and concentration. In her opinion, all co-working spaces should offer quiet zones. But if they don't, "the solution to achieving quiet becomes the best pair of headphones", she says.

Liquid's design team addressed the noise issue through sound-diffusing carpet and indoor plants. Trying to be "as green as possible", they chose low volatile organic compound paints, flooring made from sustainable bamboo and recycled plastic, and energy-efficient fluorescent and LED lighting.



Wynd, a co-working space that opened in Lan Kwai Fong in September 2013, was fortunate to have an in-house designer. Rick Lam Yin-cheuk, one of Wynd's founders, is also a co-founder of Architecture Commons, an architectural practice.

Wynd consists of three units within a commercial building, totaling 2,500 sq ft. The first is used as a generous lounge space, next to the pantry and pigeon holes where members tend to congregate and socialise.

"The lounge also doubles as an event space, as we believe that building a community is part and parcel of the co-working business," Lam said.

The other two units are dedicated to working and include an open studio, a section with fixed workstations and hot desks.

Much thought was given to the furniture selection, Lam said. "Our desks are designed with comfort in mind. The supporting structure is a substantial steel frame to ensure there is no wobbling, even on our supersized desks."



Due to spatial constraints the chairs had to be stackable, durable, and ergonomic, which persuaded him to choose the Magis Chair First, an Italian brand.

Because preferences vary, a range of design configurations is available within the space – desks either facing or angled away from the windows, in sunlight or not.

To assist with noise reduction, ceiling hooks were installed to hold removable acoustical curtains. "We sandwiched a thick layer of sound-absorbing material within two layers of heavy duty canvas," said Lam.

Australian interior architect Mairead Murphy has also shown that a shared workspace can be about style as well as substance. She's done this at Studio Sisu, a workspace used by six mostly sole-operators engaged in various creative sectors (including Murphy's fledging design business, Maiké Design Studio).

The 240 square metre former warehouse in Melbourne's Northcote was originally purchased by Murphy and her husband for conversion to a home.

Murphy liked the idea of immersing herself in a "creative space" filled with like-minded people. As a designer just starting out, it was also important for her to show that her's was a serious business, and part of that was having "an established-feeling space", one that was also high on design detail.

Rusty Benson, co-founder of Raine and Makin, a communications design business, has been at Studio Sisu since June 2013. He describes it as "a great, creative place to work in", not only because the physical space is "quite beautiful", but also because of the type of people it attracts.

