Metamorphosis
The restructuring of Office Buildings as a Communications Task

Thomas Dienes

It has become necessary in recent years to restructuring the organization of companies at ever-shorter intervals, a trend which has had far-reaching effects on the planning and design of office buildings. These changes were prompted by a variety of factors, such as: increasing international competition, changing values in society, new approaches resulting from the recession in the 1990's, speedy innovation, changes in market demand at ever-decreasing intervals, lack of resources, the influence of information and communication technology. The terms "learn management" or "facility management" describe the changes which resulted. The term "corporate real estate management" has become a buzzword whose meaning is defined in several different ways. The following objectives are linked to this term:
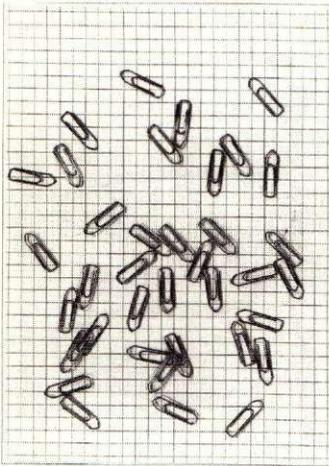
- lowest possible costs
- lower consumption of resources
- increased return on invested capital
- attaining greater flexibility
- focusing on potential successes
- making optimum use of the creativity and knowledge potential of the workforce
- supporting the development of the workforce

This new approach means that a company has new objectives, leading to a change in corporate organization which is in turn linked to the restructuring of office buildings.
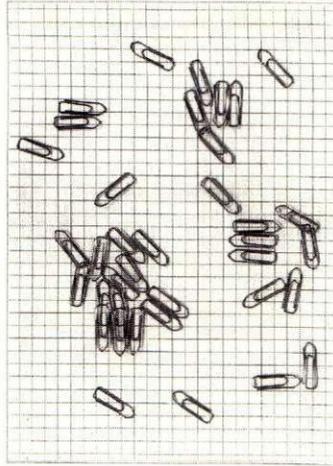
The Change in Corporate organization

What types of organizational restructuring measures demand the wide-scale restructuring of a building?
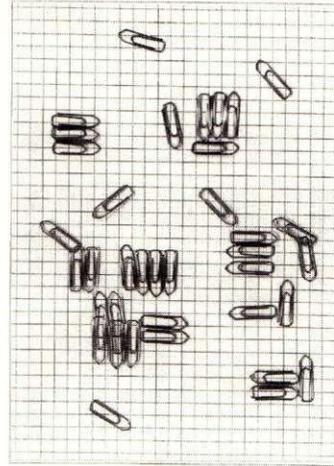
There can be no doubt that the gradual but increasing breaking up of a company as an organizational and geographic unit is one of the most decisive developments in recent years. This development is exemplified by the "modularization" of the company to form largely autonomous organizational units. This leads to the reduction of hierarchical structures. Previously defined communications structures are also changed in favor of direct and more flexible communication networks. This organizational decentralization also leads to a geographical break-up of office buildings. The following concrete planning questions result from this:
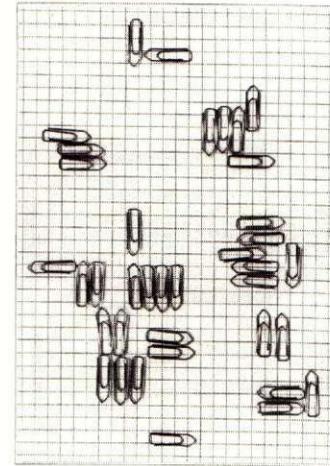
Chaos   Chaos .... separierende Ordnung   separierende Ordnung

- are central locations where many functions are housed under one roof still appropriate to the times we lined in?

- are the central communications floors or buildings which are so frequently conceived and implemented really a rational solution when communication takes place everywhere within a company?

- what changes are entitled in the room concept, the building concept, the room utilization structure and the furnishing of the workplaces?

- is it logically consistent for employees of autonomous corporate units to work in autonomous, well laid-out buildings with an individual character?

The "fostering of autonomy" for the corporate units means greater responsibility for individual employees and the possibility of self-development. This organizational concept of autonomous groups is also an attempt to utilize the creativity and performance potential of employees more effectively within the framework of corporate real estate management.

Involvement in all decisions relevant to the group, including decisions regarding building plans, is an integral part of this organizational approach. It is essential to consider:
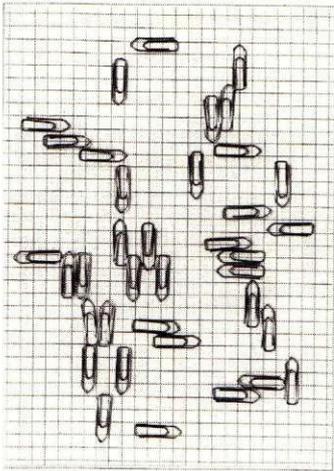
- how the planning process needs to be structured so that planning decisions can be achieved with an appropriate expenditure of effort and with the involvement of the relevant corporate units?

- what conditions need to be met and what tools need to be used in order to facilitate faster, more efficient cooperation?

- how an office building needs to be structured in order to meet present and future developments in the company's structure?

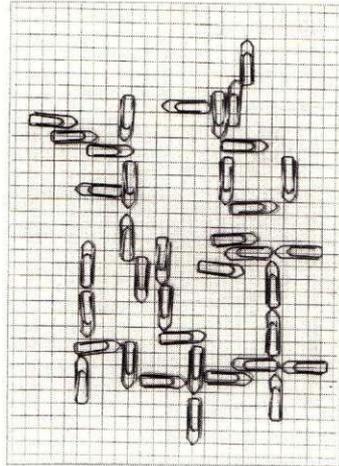The "teleworking" model, which entails the relocation of certain tasks from the corporate working environment to the domestic environment of employees, will become increasingly common in the next few years. The required spatial workplace concepts mean that planners face questions such as:

- how can the spatial proximity of work, homelife and leisure time within a dwelling be reconciled with people's need for clearly-defined leisure time?

- how do living quarters and their infrastructure change?

- how does the function of the office building change – will it soon simply play the role of a communication center and meeting place?

- will the office building become entirely redundant because the new communications centers can be located any where – in every restaurant, park or railway carriage?
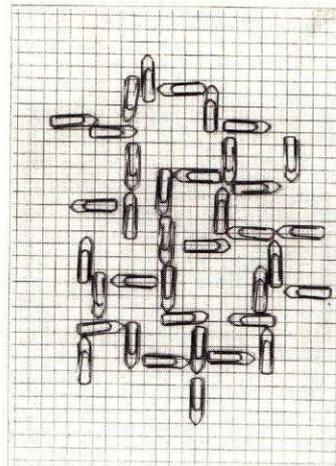
"Outsourcing" means entrusting services which do not belong to the core areas of the company to external providers. Many forms and levels of integrating services in a company can be practiced.
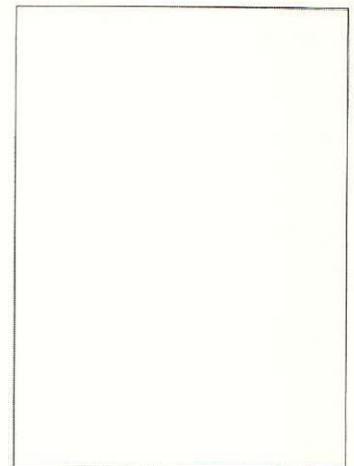
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In this case it is necessary to consider how employees of an external company can work in the offices of a host company and what spatial consequences this would entail.

The "shared workplaces" model, which involves 2.3 or more employees using a single workplace has an influence on the structure of the rooms, right down to the office furniture. In this case, the following questions arise regarding the restructuring of an office building:

- how can the optimum utilization of the workplace and room be reconciled with the simultaneous desire for a personal workplace?

- how can the overlapping periods resulting from flexi-time be organized?

- is there a distinction between individual or specific office furniture and a neutral, functional room structure?

- does the furniture become the most important personal element ("this is my desk")instead of the room?

- are open-plan rooms with individual, easily moveable and regroupable furniture conceivable?

One thing all the developments described have in common is the dissolution of organizational and spatial boundaries within a company. "The company, i.e. the institution for generating and implementing entrepreneurial ideas, continues to exist, but in radically changed organizational forms. It carries out its task of providing services between the resources market and customer problems in a rational way to an ever-decreasing degree within its own divisions, depending increasingly on network organizations with third parties, in a so called virtual company". (Reichwald 1995, 66)

Restructuring Measures in Office Buildings

Because of the far-reaching changes described, today's planners find themselves confronted with many-layered tasks, some of them unfamiliar. Their work will be less determined by new building projects and more by restructuring and conversion contracts. The knowledge of new organizational forms must be used to develop new spatial concepts in existing buildings, while taking workforce potential into account. The coordination of a network of representatives of different disciplines and interests, all of whom have an opinion about the project, is mostly the responsibility of the planner. The planner must take account of the interests of the subsequent users of the building without knowing precisely who they will be and what they will require. The make-up of the corporate units can change very quickly. Planners are required to implement the project within the terms of a unity corporate identity which is often very vaguely formulated or contradictory. Finally, planners have to make their work transparent and must be open to discussion.

A new challenge arises for architects when they are required to plan adequate rooms for the new company within existing buildings and under time and cost pressures. This means that the

Spatial independence, purposeful group formation, flexibility are on their way

process of developing an office or office building for the organization of a future company will gain particular importance. This is a process in which the objectives and principles of corporate real estate management are reflected.

The most important links in this process are the employees of the various corporate units. It has also proven useful to tap the creativity and knowledge of these employees when developing new designs for rooms and buildings.

A Communication task

One way to develop and build office buildings with a future is to tap the creativity and knowledge of the intended users. It is apparent that a rise in quality and a reduction in costs are mainly achieved when these pro-cesses are applied as soon as possible and when they are stimulated and accompanied by methodical support. The social sciences offer many theories and methods for this.

The involvement of experts with a knowledge of communicative proces-ses entails a considerable relief for architects. At the same time, the results of such communicative planning ma-nagement are in harmony with the objectives and demands of corporate real estate management. for example:

- A communication analysis is carried out when a main administration buil-ding is restructured, in order to draw conclusions for spatial designs from knowledge of current and above all, future communications networks.

The result is an empirical basis for confident decisions.

- The structured preparation and moderated execution of planning discussions in the pre-planning and planning phases reduce the length of sessions and increase their effici-ency.
Destructive conflicts in the planning process are avoided.

- The practical experiences and desires of users are examined between the pre-planning and design phases. This valuable and indispensable in-formation from the basis for the leeway available to planners in deve-loping their plans for implementing designs.
Innovative ideas and the specific, work-related experience of individual employees support and enrich the concrete planning process.

- The various interim results are pre-pared in an easily understood way and presented to the interested par-ties in the course of the planning phases.
The planner's work is rendered transpa-rent, making easier to identify with the company and with the new work space.
The general objectives of the com-pany are interpreted as concrete restructuring measures in discussion sessions and work groups involving employees from a variety of hierar-chical levels.
A plan results which is in harmony with the company's objectives.

- The employees are questioned about their satisfaction with their new workplace in order to test the effect of certain architectural measures as

a basis for other, similar projects. *The feedback from experienced users can be helpful in obtaining a basis for continuos further development of the planning qualities.*

It is clear that the tasks of the architects are closely linked to the developments in the company. New forms of corporate organization affect structural, spatial or aesthetic considerations when office buildings are being reorganized. As a corollary to this, innovative planning ideas can provide the impetus for organizational developments. Experience has shown that this link should form the basis for highly innovative, top-quality solutions involving dialogue and exchange of experience.

Thomas Dienes, Ph.D.,
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