

# Cubitopia

The utopian ideal of the cubicle

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AT THE END OF THE 1970s, the old regime of the American corporate office was under fire. The walls and doors that separated one employee from another had come to be seen as obstacles in the path of revolutionary change. It wasn't long-haired radicals who led the charge, nor was it the blue-

collared proletariat who felt bound by the old order. This was a revolution of white-collar professionals. Their intellectuals—architects, advertisers, and especially business writers—argued that individual offices were becoming a thing of the past, and none too soon. Oversized offices, offices with windows, corner



offices—these structures of arrogance and petty resentment had for so long seemed permanent and inevitable. Now they had to come down. A new world was rising from this rubble, a world of openings: open lines of communication, “open door policies”—or no doors at all! A new age was dawning: the Age of the Cubicle.

Architecture publications of the 1970s described the new cubi-cled office as “cybernetic,” without walls to stop the “free flow of ideas.” If the pictures in cubicle advertisements were any indication of their promise, cubicles helped ideas flow quite freely indeed. Without computers, email, and the internet, employees in these ads are pictured in moments of frenzied, low-tech communication: pointing to each other across the room, handing papers over and around the burnt orange (“aesthetically pleasing and humanly satisfying”) partitions, all while talking on the phone and jotting down notes.

West Coast technology companies gave the cubicle its initial sparkle. In the late 1970s, business writers described the radical work arrangements of Silicon Valley with breathless enthusiasm. The computer chip company Intel often served as

the example of what cubicles made possible. The company had no time cards, no dress codes, no assigned parking spots, no special cafeterias for executives, and above all, no offices, just a sea of half-wall partitions. The long, low buildings of Intel were fields of shared labor, like the communal farms that had so recently dotted the hills around Intel’s Silicon Valley campus. CEO Andrew Grove, hip and casual in an open-necked wide-collared shirt and gold chains, was an unpretentious man of the people. He moved among the workers of Intel “empowering” them to do their jobs, and sat at a cubicle at one side of the vast work floor ready to help. Most incredible of all (and unlike the communal farms), this social experiment was economically viable. In a time when the great industrial powers were falling to Japanese competition, Intel was making money hand over fist. The model was powerfully attractive. In 1980, *Atlantic Monthly* contributor James Fallows asked the question on the minds of so many worried observers of American industry: “Could the tire companies, the machine tool makers, the color TV industry, learn to work this way?”

The fascination with fluid, egalitarian organization might have remained a passing fad had it not been for management writers. In the early 1980s, precisely at the moment of the cubicle’s ascent, management consultants found a public hungry for management wisdom. Suddenly management books, previously confined to business school bookstores, joined diet manuals and self-help books as best-sellers. They instructed Americans in the subtleties of Japanese management, quality control, and globalization, but behind these particular trends management writers saw what they believed to be the beginning of a new era in which bureaucracy and hierarchy would be obsolete and equality, creativity, and change would rule the day. Management writers often referred to this shift as the “management revolution,” writing books with titles like *Liberation Management* to drive the point home. The cubicle, with its flexible structure and inherent egalitarianism, provided the physical backdrop for this vision.

Needless to say, the cubicle has lost much of its luster. Less favorable interpretations of the “revolution” were always possible, of course: one person’s





flexibility was another's part-time job without benefits. But the cubicle no longer enjoys even this ambiguous position. In 2006 *Fortune* ran an article entitled "Cubicles: The Great Mistake," complete with a public apology from one of the first cubicle designers. Twenty years after his *Atlantic Monthly* article extolling the virtues of the cubicled office, Fallows wrote another on how he changed his mind. In *Dilbert*, *The Office*, *Office Space*, and many other popular satires of contemporary office work, the cubicle is a symbol of all that is petty, uninspiring, and even dehumanizing in corporate life. The promises of cubicle utopia now seem curious, to say the least.

More than a mere curiosity, the short history of cubicle utopianism is suggestive of a deeper current of restlessness in contemporary economic life. The utopia of the cubicled office was less a positive vision for the future than an expression of frustration with the present. Cubicles were most appealing as an abstraction and when pitted *against* something broad and amorphous like "bureaucracy" and "hierarchy"; their own character remained in the background. It is telling that "change" (not any *particular* change, mind you) was first spoken of in management talk as a good at the time of the cubicle's rise.

Frustration with the present is nothing new to capitalism. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wondered at the disruptive power of markets, noting that under their influence "all fixed, fast-frozen relations...are swept away." In the early twentieth century and with very different politics, economist Joseph Schumpeter argued that capitalism was characterized by a process of "creative destruction." There certainly is a disposition cultivated by capitalism—the watchfulness for opportunity, the striving for lower costs, the

quest for new markets—that has always introduced a shot of dynamism into the world. But there is something different about the sound of such phrases to us today. "Creative destruction" used to be a counter-intuitive, even provocative, phrase. Capitalists—conservative in dress and morals—were, on the face of it, the establishment, hardly creative or destructive. But we now listen to internet executives in flip-flops, goatees, and tie-dye talk about the revolutionary potential of their company. Filtered through the counter-culture, "creative destruction" has become a business ideal. "Game changing products" and "disruptive technologies" are cause for shareholder celebration. "Change-agents" and people who can "re-invent themselves" are employee-of-the-month material.

The openness to new possibilities entailed in this ideal undoubtedly has a certain appeal. We are increasingly freed from rigid job descriptions, fixed roles, and career tracks. Career and management experts encourage us to be light on our feet, ready to make a move should the opportunity arise. However, our situation is also fraught with anxiety. Companies are freed from loyalty to us as well, should we fail or our niches disappear. We are haunted, as sociologist Richard Sennett says, by the "specter of uselessness."

Perhaps someday the old offices with their big, solid walls will return. For now, however, restlessness seems to have settled in and put down roots. Cubicles, no longer the symbol of a wonderful society of the future, achieve a nearly perfect architectural expression of the restless present. Starting over no longer requires sledgehammers and demolition workers—just a new idea and a few screwdrivers. ■