



Andrew Wong, head of Facebook's agency and reseller business in Greater China, at Facebook's Hong Kong office

PHOTOGRAPHY GARETH DAY

CREATIVE SPACES, CREATIVE MINDS

Far from being the sole realm of Silicon Valley tech giants, more companies are realising that innovative office design can boost creativity and productivity.

STORY CHRISTY CHOI

The sweeping harbour views and funky open design at Facebook's Hong Kong offices on the 60th floor of One Island East in Quarry Bay embody the ideas of openness and connection that Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg touts as the company's ethos.

There's a mahjong table with Facebook-emblazoned blue tiles, a treadmill with a desktop and a massage chair – each with incredible views. Nearby, apartment blocks of neighbouring Taikoo Shing resemble Lego models.

"It's inspiration from the outside for the inside," says Andrew Wong, head of Facebook's agency and reseller business in Greater China. The open-plan office, which includes a well-stocked pantry, encourages people from different departments to mingle, says Jayne Leung, head of Greater China for Facebook.

The space takes cues from the city's history: one wall depicts old *tong lau* by Hong Kong-based street artist Caratoes, and a painted pillar pays homage to the calligraphy of the late Tsang Tsou-choi, known as the 'King of Kowloon', whose street art appeared on many surfaces across the Kowloon peninsula before almost all of it was painted over.

With exposed pipes and light fixtures snaking across the ceiling and corrugated iron shutters, there's a rough, unfinished feel to the space. This, says Leung, helps remind staff of a motivational saying that Zuckerberg is fond of: "The journey is only one per cent finished."

Google is another media giant that is famous for its innovative workplaces and engendering out-of-the-box thinking. "To encourage creativity, wild ideas and moonshot [shoot-for-the-moon] thinking, one should create an environment that helps you achieve that," says Google Hong Kong's managing director, Dominic Allon.



“[FACEBOOK HONG KONG’S OFFICE DESIGN] ENCOURAGES A LOT OF COLLABORATION. WE COMMUNICATE A LOT”

— Jayne Leung, Facebook



PHOTOGRAPHY: BARETH BAY

“WE HAVE CREATED A PLAYFUL ENVIRONMENT WHERE GOOGLERS CAN CREATE, COLLABORATE AND EXPERIMENT AT AN OPEN OFFICE”

— Dominic Allon, Google Hong Kong



“We have created a playful environment where Googlers can create, collaborate and experiment in an open office,” says Allon, describing the company’s office in Hong Kong. “We believe that great ideas can emerge from a conversation over coffee or lunch.”

The Google Hong Kong office in Causeway Bay’s Times Square boasts table tennis and foosball tables, murals depicting panoramic views of Hong Kong and cafe-like booths near office desks.

OFFICES FOR THE FUTURE

Facebook and Google’s offices are part of an increasingly common phenomenon. The modern workplace has been undergoing a transformation. Gone are dank, drab interiors with flickering fluorescent lights, according to many designers and companies. Now, innovative offices include features such as massage chairs and “think spaces” – quiet areas where employees can get away from the regular office environment to think.

“We’ve always sought to create an office that fosters our engineers’ creativity,” said Facebook’s then-environmental design manager Everett Katigbak in 2012, when announcing the plans for the company’s new campus expansion in California’s Menlo Park, designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry.

“Just like we do now, everyone will sit out in the open with desks that can be quickly shuffled around as teams form and break apart around projects,” Katigbak wrote – in a post on Facebook, of course. “We’ll fill the building with breakaway spaces with couches and whiteboards to make getting away from your desk easy.” One massive building is slated to provide workspace for about 2,800 engineers at the social media giant.

Flexibility has started to become an important component of office design. When David Radcliffe,

Google’s vice-president of real estate, announced the company’s plan to redevelop its Mountain View headquarters in February, he described “lightweight block-like structures which can be moved around easily as we invest in new product areas” – structures that will be created instead of “immovable concrete buildings”.

It’s now all about the staff: how to

best encourage them to be creative and make them more comfortable and productive. “Design is nothing without the users,” says Lorène Faure of architectural design practice Bean Buro.

Before embarking on the design of the new Hong Kong offices of Korean creative agency Cheil, Faure and Kenny Kinugasa-Tsui, the two directors of Bean Buro,

OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Facebook’s Hong Kong office features a wall depicting the city’s *tong lau*. Jayne Leung, head of Greater China for Facebook. The office includes a well-stocked open plan pantry.

RIGHT FROM TOP Dominic Allon at Google Hong Kong’s office in Times Square, Causeway Bay. Staff take a break at the Google Hong Kong office.

COURTESY: GOOGLE HONG KONG



spoke to the agency's staff from different departments to help ensure that the new space would cater well to their needs.

Cheil's old premises in Wan Chai had partitioned cubicles and offices, reflecting traditional hierarchies associated with Korean culture. In contrast, Cheil's new office in Sheung Wan feels light and airy, cosy and comfortable – the kind of place that makes you want to linger. In one meeting room, tables can be put together in a sort of jigsaw arrangement or kept apart, according to staff needs.

Books and bottles of wine fill bookcases made of well-finished chipboard, and at a modern lounge, which serves as the office's reception, clients can sit near an inviting fireplace, surrounded by bright contemporary art pieces owned by Cheil's Greater China CEO, Aaron Lau. The fireplace is

an impressive, hi-tech and eco-friendly touch. "It's biofuel – it doesn't create fumes and you don't need ventilation," says Faure.

In an era where many entrepreneurs often work at home or in cafes, ideas about workspaces have been changing. "People sometimes want to work on a couch," says Kinugasa-Tsui. "They want to have roundtables and cafe moments. The [Cheil] space helps create as much informal discussion as possible. Social interactions are always a good thing."

The idea that there's an important link between interactions at work and both innovation and better company performance is supported by the research. "We've learned, for example, that face-to-face interactions are by far the most important activity in an office," wrote Ben Waber, Jennifer



"THE [CHEIL] SPACE HELPS CREATE AS MUCH INFORMAL DISCUSSION AS POSSIBLE."

— Kenny Kinugasa-Tsui, Bean Buro

Magnolfi and Greg Lindsay in a joint piece titled "Workspaces that Move People" in the *Harvard Business Review* in October 2014.

"Our data suggest that creating collisions – chance encounters and unplanned interactions between knowledge workers, both inside and outside the organisation – improves performance," the authors wrote. Waber is the CEO of a management services firm

TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM
Google's local office includes table tennis and foosball tables and bright walls.

TOP RIGHT AND OPPOSITE PAGE
Cheil's offices in Sheung Wan. Kenny Kinugasa-Tsui and Lorene Faure, directors of Bean Buro. Cheil's reception.

COURTESY GOOGLE HONG KONG / BEAN BURO



and a scientist, while Magnolfi is an R&D consultant and Lindsay is a writer working on a book about the intersection of social networks with physical places.

The authors described a study where the movements of about 50 sales executives at a pharmaceuticals company were tracked over several weeks. The data collected showed that when a salesperson increased interactions with co-workers on other teams by 10 per cent, his or her sales grew by 10 per cent.

As a result, the company decided to remove its small coffee machines (which served about six employees each) and build fewer, bigger ones (one for every 120 employees) to take their place. It also created a large cafeteria in place of a small one that few employees used. In the quarter after these changes were implemented, company sales rose by 20 per cent.

RETHINKING TRADITIONS

Other, traditionally more conservative businesses, such as professional services firms, have also been rethinking their workspaces. When consulting firm McKinsey & Company decided to redesign its Hong Kong premises, it asked leading architecture firm OMA to come up with a space "that is innovative and enhances the McKinsey experience".

The old office had cubicles surrounded by the offices of senior-level executives and partners – and it was the latter spaces that enjoyed natural light. David Gianotten, the OMA partner in charge of the project, had a few big ideas for the revamp. "We said, 'Listen, partners aren't often in the office – why not give the space back to the people who are going to be spending the most time there?'" he recalls.

McKinsey's new office, at ICBC Tower in Central, was completed in 2011. It provides more room for shared amenities

and services, and sunlight reaches those staff members who spend the most time at their desks. The workspace also became more visible to clients, enabling them to see how McKinsey consultants work and feel more connected to the firm.

Marble, dark woods and carpeted floors were replaced with lighter-coloured woods, bright furniture and transparent glass walls. “Nick Leung, one of the younger-generation partners, was the one who [initiated it]. He had the vision to change things,” says Gianotten.

But what McKinsey did with the Hong Kong office – and is in the process of rolling out for its Beijing office – is still rare in the relatively conservative worlds of consulting, finance and law, says Gianotten.

“The main barrier is the tradition of a firm. Change is a risky thing. You have to think about how it will be perceived by your clients. I don’t think many parties are willing to take these risks,” he says.

But once people see how spaces can be enhanced, it might be difficult to go back to less-inspiring work environments. “People aren’t going to want to go back to cubicles and fluorescent lights after working at a place like this,” says Faure, gesturing at the welcoming spaces within Cheil’s Sheung Wan office.

SHARING AND INSPIRING

Freelancers and those who run small businesses don’t have the same opportunities to interact with co-workers that employees of large organisations do – an issue that co-working spaces such as The Hive try to address.

Spanning five floors of The Phoenix in Wan Chai, and with facilities in Kennedy Town, Sai Kung and even Bangkok, The Hive has around 600 members.

Entrepreneurs, marketers, interior designers, sales

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— David Gianotten, OMA



“I’M LEARNING NEW THINGS, DEVELOPING ... I KNOW PEOPLE WHO’VE HAD DISCUSSIONS ABOUT PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH THE SPACE [AT THE HIVE]”

— Amanda Reynaud, WDHB

OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP
David Gianotten, OMA’s managing partner-architect. McKinsey’s Hong Kong office, redesigned by OMA, was completed in 2011.

FROM TOP
Offices at co-working space The Hive in Wan Chai. The space encourages interactions among entrepreneurs and other people from different industries.

representatives, video editors and other individuals work side by side, either in small offices or at shared ‘hot desks’ – desks that can be used by anyone from time to time, with no particular designated user.

Such spaces can help foster creativity and business development by providing their users the chance to interact with people from other industries. “I’m learning new things, developing the mind,” says Amanda Reynaud, the CEO of executive education firm WDHB. “I know people who’ve had discussions about partnerships through the space [at The Hive],” she adds.

Reynaud is sitting next to Daniel van Hensbergen, a chatty sales director for Dutch pharmaceutical company YouMedical, on a patio 20 floors above the din of the midday traffic in Wan Chai. A co-working space “creates a kind of energy,” van Hensbergen says. “Definitely,” agrees Reynaud.

Events at The Hive’s outdoor patio allow people who wouldn’t normally have the chance to meet to mingle, and the organisation’s administrative staff proactively help link up members who they think will benefit from knowing

each other. The patio has hosted pop-up markets on the weekend, open-air cinema nights, birthday parties, yoga classes and launch events, says Constant Tedder, founder of The Hive.

Reynaud says working in a shared space has contributed a lot to productivity. Because hot desks are shared, this helps eliminates clutter, she says. The minimalism that results encourages a start-up maintain a lean mindset, and moving around helps give rise to new ideas and solutions. “You’re literally looking at something differently,” Reynaud says. ☺