

Public #3

# Work Life

Edited by James Calder



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# Forms follow finances: Twisted, turned, tall

Stephan C Reinke

**‘Who cares?’ While this is not a quote from Swiss Re, the developers of 30 St. Mary’s Axe, it is, in essence, their response to the question: Why have you built such an extraordinarily expensive office building that does not match market demand and one in which every floorplate is different?**

**30 St. Mary’s Axe is, of course, the Swiss Re building in the City of London, fondly known as The Gherkin.**

**Swiss Re’s development people have explained that the driving force in their opinions behind Foster & Partner’s unique design was the creation of a true international icon that would represent their company’s brand and enhance their global profile (Lord Sir Norman Foster and Mr. Ken Shuttleworth had other aspirations in mind such as sustainability, spatial quality, flexibility and pushing-the-limits technology).**

**The point is that the design of 30 St. Mary’s Axe (and many other office buildings being built in the early part of the 21st century) is being informed not necessarily by daylighting, net to gross ratios, utilisation or flexibility for a multiplicity of occupants and tenants. The raison d’etre is rather to create an identity; a brand which generates powerful imagery in the cityscape relating to a specific organisation or corporation. The fundamental principle: an iconic shape supersedes a well-planned and rational workplace.**

**It is about aspiration and legacy. This notion – to create an office building; a tall office building, which not only answers the bell in terms of functionality but also serves to lift the spirit and enhance the urban fabric and townscape – is not new.**

The architects of this land and generation are now brought face to face with something new under the sun – namely, that evolution and integration of social conditions, that special grouping of them that results in a demand for the erection of tall office buildings. Let us state the conditions in the plainest manner. Briefly, they are these: offices are necessary for the transaction of business; the invention and perfection of the high-speed elevators make vertical travel, that was once tedious and painful, now easy and comfortable; development of steel manufacture has shown the way to safe, rigid, economical constructions rising to a great height; continued growth of population in the great cities, consequent congestion of centres and rise in value of ground, stimulate an increase in number of stories, these successfully piled upon another, react on ground values, and so on, by action and reaction, interaction and inter-reaction. Thus has come about the form of lofty construction called the ‘modern office building’. It has come in answer to a call, for in it a new grouping of social conditions has found habitation and a name.

Up to this point all in evidence in materialistic, an exhibition of force, of resolution, of brains in the keen sharp sense of the word. It is the joint product of the speculator, the engineer, the builder.

Problem: How shall we impart to this sterile pile, this crude, harsh, brutal agglomeration, this stark, staring exclamation of eternal strife, the graciousness of those higher forms of sensibility and culture that rest on the lower and fiercer passions? How shall we proclaim from the dizzy height of this strange, weird, modern housetop the peaceful evangel of sentiment, of beauty, the cult of a higher life?

These progressive thoughts and challenges are not the result of an enlightened late 20th century architectural debate, but were put forward in 1896, by one of my Chicago hometown heroes, Louis H. Sullivan in his article, The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered.

So, how do we develop ‘the cult of a higher life’?

The genesis for an outstanding workplace building in the 21st century must derive from several critical criteria and a rigorous understanding of their importance. All are of equal value and must be balanced in a composition that creates an inspirational development of lasting quality and value in the built environment.

#### **Sustainability**

Sustainability is perhaps the key criteria in the development and design of a tall workplace building. A simple, yet rarely employed, design driver is the orientation of the building as it relates to sun, wind and environmental conditions. The 20th century paradigm was simply to extrude the plan form vertically, uniformly and without consideration for the enormous potential that the massing of a tall building offers.

In addition, the standard solution for nearly 100 years has been to uniformly clad façade and/or envelope the building in the same configuration on all four compass points. It should be an obvious step in the creative process to utilise orientation to create a unique or even sculptured office building form. The vision must be to create designs that offer a specific strategy for the lifecycle costing and operations of major workplace office buildings.



## Trends in the workplace

Trends in the workplace indicate that the move towards open plan, flexible space and alternative working patterns will continue. Designing space which enhances the ability of an organisation to flourish will continue to remain a significant challenge resulting from a change from process driven toil toward the growing emphasis on knowledge work.

Peter Drucker, American economist, first identified knowledge workers: staff or employees whose primary focus transcends simple production. The normal office building is being radically challenged by the rise of wireless technologies and new ways of working. The issue of choice, as it affects floorplates and ultimately office and tall building design, cannot be overstated. Another dramatically apparent demand in the Western World that these buildings will need to embrace, is the phenomenon of changing demographics including the iPod generation, multiculturalism, more older female workers and an ageing population.

## Technology

In the early part of the 21st century, technology is the greatest informant of workplace office building design. This relates not only to the work patterns and habits of the growing knowledge worker population, but more specifically to the advances in building technology and design. The performance of building facades, the development of high speed and selective lifting and people moving systems and the rapid advances in communications technology are the key drivers in the composition of physical space defining workspace and tall office building design.

In particular, there is a focus on optics and other communication systems. Technology is not a panacea for the personal space demands of the knowledge worker. Daylight, sunlight, air control and a range of other environmental criteria will also need to be addressed in the design of the future workplace.

## Market driven criteria

Market driven criteria are those indices which drive the concentration and density of tall office buildings in particular. The notion of consolidation and adjacency continues to generate tall buildings and concentrated clusters for a variety of corporations and organisations. Peter Wynne Rees, long time Head of Planning for the City Corporation of London, repeatedly emphasises the benefits of serendipity in 'The City', the world capital for international finance.

After his many years guiding London's urban design which now includes skyscrapers and groundscrapers, he insists, 'that the proximity of a range of financial services companies, their staff, experts and customers creates a conversation; a dialogue on the streets, in the pubs, bars and restaurants, which underpins the strength of the centre of the world for international finance'. Understanding this phenomenon and how the dynamics of the urban environment mix, in a cocktail of business concerns, is vital to creating a workplace community in a tall building.

## Urban design and architecture

Urban design and architecture now have common definitions, however, the words Urban and Design, were first joined to create a new discipline in the late 1950s. Visionaries at this time, such as Jane Jacobs, Edmund Bacon and William Holly Whyte, revealed – through their study and insight the importance of 'the space between' – ever increasing densities and height of our cities. Their work spoke to the way in which office workers and all the users of the urban environment utilise space and the complex dynamics which relate to urban design; an ongoing study which must rigorously be understood to inform our design consciousness.

The architecture of the workplace as opportunity to identify both space and time might best be captured in the Chrysler Building in Manhattan. The romance, glamour and soaring exuberance of this composition masks the reality of a standard office floorplate extruded skyward for over three quarters of its height. Few other 19th century tall office buildings offer such a compelling vision of what we now embrace; an iconic shape that manifests the brand, the corporation associated with its birth and delivery. For this address in Manhattan, Chrysler is still the moniker, and beauty, style and cutting edge are still the adjectives associated with the 77-year-old high rise. It is the building's imprimatur, taken from W.P. Chrysler, that outlives the remarkable architect who designed it, William Van Alen (who later suffered at the hands of the client), and overlooks the fact that the automobile company has not owned the structure for many decades.

Only by employing an intellectual process – design intelligence – can a design solution exceed the expectations embedded in these international experiences to inform these types of buildings, which have enormous impact on our urban environment.

World knowledge offers such richness for the development and design of tall office buildings that to exclusively use local applications is like reading only a single page of a very large book.



**Create an unambiguous and stimulating message**

The marriage of urban context and the responsibility a tall building carries in relation to place making and wayfinding, should provide residents and users with a clear and unambiguous message. The statement of tall office buildings in the future will transcend 20th century traditions and stereotypes of this building typology. In the same way that the profile, habits and characteristics of workplace users evolves, so too must the function, anatomy and, yes, the physical form of the tall office building of the future.

The denouement for 30 St. Mary's Axe? The building has changed hands recently and the Swiss reinsurance company branded property is now part of the portfolio of a mega German property company. This remarkable building, once commonly known as the Swiss Re Tower,

is now firmly and indelibly – named by the ubiquitous London cab driver – known as the Gherkin.

In early January, 2007, 30 St. Mary's Axe achieved the highest per floor rental in London in a decade. This, after several years in which common market perception and 'expert' development advice opined that an 'oddly shaped' building with an arbitrary phallic shape was 'inappropriate for a serious business occupier'.

So, the Gherkin has 'come good' in its own right and the notion of a building whose geometry and expression is not a pure extrusion of the best lease depth is severely compromised. The debate on form versus finance continues, and the meaning of function, in relation to the design of workplace office buildings, shows great potential to be wonderfully twisted, tilted and tall.



Southern Cross East Tower, Melbourne (Architect: Woods Bagot)



Park Plaza, Dubai (Architect: Woods Bagot)



Shenzhen Residential Towers, China (Architect: Woods Bagot)



Proposed Tower, Brisbane  
(Architect: Woods Bagot)



Liverpool Central Plaza, UK  
(Architect: Woods Bagot)

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