
Office work

Background

Tools:

The briefs set to those connected to the Designers in Residence scheme at Northumbria University act as vehicles to showcase a shared preoccupation with functional objects, the value of making skills and materials knowledge.

Utility:

The design briefs are part of *The Tools for Everyday Life* project that aims to create a collection of commercially viable, utilitarian products. The 'tool' reference points to the elegance certain functional products have in how they connect users with a task. The intention of the project is to investigate the language of task focused objects.

Office work:

The venue for much 'work' today is the curious place called the office. For while the internet has enabled mobile white collar work and shifted some 'office' activity to homes and coffee shops, the majority of 'office work' still consists of presenting, chatting, listening, feeding in, feeding back, typing, filing and processing information at a fixed place of work.

The important decisions that shape much of the world are made in offices but little is physically done meaning immediate visceral gratification for the worker just doesn't happen. No amount of Ping-Pong, broom cupboard nookie, stand up meetings or hot desking will change the nature of this sort of work. The satisfaction of office work is largely abstract. Therefore, mirroring Morris's and Ruskin's rose tinted view of an imagined medieval craftsperson's version of work, the office worker often longs for the more rewarding and physically demanding way of earning a crust. Those not physically working often seek a connection to something tangible with an element of physical effort and immediate feedback from the senses.¹

"Smart devices, unified communications channels, and natural forms of interface are creating new behaviors in the workplace." ²

There is a danger that these new behaviors, led by technological advances in communication, may even result in the loss of the few immediate physical pleasures that were part and parcel of the office work of 'things'. The licking of envelopes, the stapling of papers and writing with a pen whilst not exhausting pursuits as such do connect the person doing them with a tangible result and the (office) tools of the trade. Today physical skills and practiced movements of mass and matter are lost to gestures, swipes or smart-arsed Natural User Interfaces (NUIs) the workings of which are a mystery.

There is a physicality missing from 'the digital', even when smart devices are operated by speech, gesture or gentle swipe, that leads to a disconnect between what is being done and the wider world of stuff. Maybe if aspects of office work were more physically satisfying people might be happier.

¹ <http://www.bestmadeco.com/pages/workshops>

² <http://www.hermanmiller.com/research/research-summaries/new-technologies-new-behaviors.html>

It would be silly to poo-poo all the efforts of workplace planners and designers³ to create more effective office environments or to imagine a world where everyone becomes a blacksmith or woodsman⁴ rather the idea of this particular outing of the Tools for Everyday Life is that we design physically interactive things for the office, objects that glory in people picking them up with rehearsed skill and using them to make their office job better.

We made some links at Herman Miller and other companies of that ilk last time out that mean a project like this is something we can discuss with potential partners/ collaborators prior to showing the stuff anywhere.

Things to do:

By enlarge we (the Tools For Everyday Life crew) all like workshops and would rather potter around places where stuff can be made than hang out in an office environment, so the idea is that we use workshops and tool use as inspiration for the office products we design. The potential for rewarding work is inherent in the layout, organization and customization of workshops/ tools.

1: Photograph interesting/inspiring workshops to provide genuine background to the project and create content.

To relate what we are doing to research carried out by people that have studied this sort of thing properly, it would be great that when looking at workshops particular attention were given to the following themes:

- **'Organisation of Space' and 'How people have sorted their own spaces out'.**
- **'Writing and drawings done by Hand'.**
- **'Skill/dexterity and the importance of feedback from tools'.**
- **'Occasionally used things'** Workshops often have the capacity for unusual, once-in-a-blue-moon, jobs.
- **'Adaption and customization of things'**

This is a different way of carrying on but the idea is to create a backstory to help us make sense of why we are doing this as well as appealing to academics with funds, manufacturers and retailers.

2: Work on the briefs.

The idea is that there will be a number of briefs set to design everyday office products over the next months that draw upon the themes (above). There is definitely scope for including the making of products that sit outside of the very specific briefs but relate to the themes (i.e. a folding chair would sit well in the "occasionally used things" category). This way of doing things allows for the various amounts of time people can commit to this and what individuals might want to get out of showing the stuff to a trade show audience.

We will discuss timescales in our next meeting and just where and how these things will be shown.

³ <http://www.stylepark.com/en/news/offices-are-like-brgrand-prix-racing/344955>

⁴ <http://vimeo.com/89001970>