

Interview with Sevil Peach

The interior designer on good solutions for today's office



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Vitra: How do you go about designing workspace for a company? Or to put it another way: What is your first step in a project?

Sevil Peach: Some years back, clients used to come to us with a list of defined requirements: We want x-number of desks with y-number of meeting rooms for znumber of employees. Now clients increasingly come with aspirational and qualitative visions rather than numeric and quantitative briefs. These less tangible aspirations such as, “we want to achieve better collaboration, communication, interaction” etc. etc. mean that the projects are more of a vehicle for cultural change rather than simply an environmental update. Therefore the first step is to clear our minds of all preconceptions, to commence the new with an open and questioning mind. Only then can you begin to open a dialogue and understand the client’s needs and business goals and aspirations. All of this needs to be understood, questioned and challenged before you can begin to design meaningfully.

Vitra: Can you explain further how clients’ briefs have changed?

SP: In most businesses these days there is a clear shift away from the Tayloristic approach in work methods. Environmentally: hierarchy, space standards, repetitive layouts, static arrangements and dedicated tasks are becoming outdated. At a business level: flexibility and multi-tasking are now necessary in order to be competitive in today's global economy. And at a personal level: diversity, empowerment and self-determination are also important issues. The straightforward brief does not really play a role anymore – well, not for us! The way it works is that clients tell us what they want to achieve with their new offices, such as improved communication or a setting that gives employees a sense of well-being and motivation. Ultimately, they want an office environment that maximises staff productivity in a positive way.



Vitra: Isn't that what all clients want?

SP: No, not all clients come with this type of brief, some are not aware of the potential of an environmental change. But, if we can establish a good dialogue with a client, no matter how conservative their initial vision may be, we always seek to make them aware of other possibilities and potentials within the project.

Vitra: You deal with so many different industries, corporate cultures and business processes. Isn't it difficult to gain an in-depth understanding?

SP: Understanding is a process based around dialogue. We conduct workshops, we hold meetings with the management, the departmental heads and the employees. These activities give us deep insights into how the company views itself and how the people view themselves within it. But at the same time, we also maintain our own perspective as an objective outside party. The more varied the opinions are, the more intensive the collaboration becomes.

Vitra: Many companies have similar goals. Do your office solutions for different clients resemble one another?

SP: It's true to say that there are common goals across most businesses such as collaboration, communication, connection, interaction, fast decision-making and fast to market – and so today's office design needs to support all these aspirations. Flexibility is also an important issue. A company could well change its strategy in a matter of months after its offices have been redesigned. The design should allow you to make adjustments easily rather than having to start all over. But beyond these organisational and practical qualities, we also need to address the stresses of today's work culture by creating human,

supportive and pleasurable environments. We believe offices still have to be able to offer individuality and provide intimacy for the people working in it. So, in a sense, what makes our office solutions different from one another is measured against each client's varied range of goals, needs and desires. Therefore, we are not dogmatic: the typical open-space office is not the only solution. It only works if it meets the needs of the company. If individual offices are a better solution for the business type, if they make sense in the context, then they are justified. On the other hand, we work with a company where the CEO has his desk right in the middle of an open space office surrounded by a host of other employees. No matter what approach is taken to an office space, it has to allow the company to reach its goals under the best human and functional conditions.

Vitra: You keep emphasising the word “human”. What exactly is a human office in your opinion?

SP: To us, a human space is an environment that equally supports and makes sense to the individual and the organisation. It's an environment that allows the individual to work within an understandable scale and landscape, as well as being light, airy, well-organised and variable. When I work at home, I sit in a place where I feel most comfortable and where I can work most effectively. I often end up at the kitchen table, sometimes I'll work on the sofa or in bed, or in the garden if the weather is nice. Like a home, a human workplace is one that offers a variety of possibilities. In essence, what I am saying is that there is not one way of working. Work environments should recognise and reflect that we work in different ways throughout the day. They should allow us to choose the workspace and tools that best suit our tasks and they should enable people to work as individuals or in a team, in concentration or in communication.



Vita: Much of what you just said reminds me of our new “Net ‘n’ Nest” approach. What are your thoughts on this concept?*

SP: If you need to give it a phrase, yes, you could say Net ‘n’ Nest is what we are talking about. But what people should understand is that “Nests” should not be seen as hideaways only for rest and relaxation. People go to the office to work! But they should be able to do their work in a way that best suits their tasks, in a way that maximises their motivation and productivity. That is our interpretation of Net ‘n’ Nest. It is a logical progression that Vitra are now emphasising it. After all, Net ‘n’ Nest is the current manifestation of an ongoing process and exploration of the office landscape, something we have explored both in Vitra's own offices and with many of our other clients. I'm sure Vitra's theoretical approach to Net ‘n’ Nest will encourage the development of new, useful and surprising products.

Vitra: Whether Net 'n' Nest or your own concepts on new, human work environments, might they not be too modern for some companies? What has to happen for these types of new work structures and methods to take root?

SP: The type of work I am describing here usually does require a cultural change of more or less dramatic proportions, not only for employees but also for management. It takes a lot of effort, education and persuasive explanations to convince people that they may now work in the cafeteria, for example, if that best suits them. And it also takes a lot of effort to convince them that doing so would not make their boss think any less of them. It is all about breaking the perceptions. But it is important to remember that change, big or little, requires time. And there will always be resistance; that is true of any change. It is sometimes the case that not all individuals will be satisfied with the new office environment and work structure. That is unavoidable, regardless of which direction change goes. However, if an inclusive project structure is set up from the outset and people are involved in the process and understand the reasons why, then fear and resistance to change can be minimised and a smoother transition can take place.

Sevil Peach is the Founding Director of the London based design studio Sevil Peach Gence Associates (SPGA) who have collaborated with Vitra for more than 10 years in creating workplace environments both with and for Vitra and a range of leading international companies.