

Bonus chapter 02: Facilities planning

It's important for all designers to have a well-planned studio that's clean, comfortable, and efficient. Space planning becomes an especially important issue when your company is expanding or relocating. A great deal of thought (and, quite often, a lot of money) will go into finding the perfect-sized space, configuring it to facilitate your work, and adding the right creature comforts to make it fun and inspiring.

If you have frequent on-site meetings with clients, your physical space is also an important part of your brand — the location and condition must reflect the high quality of your services.

Finding the right space

When selecting a location, you may be faced with a trade-off between price and proximity to your clients. It's good to be close to your most important accounts. However, if their headquarters are downtown, you might not be able to afford a large enough space in their area. Rather than squeeze your staff into an expensive space that's too small, it's usually better to find something larger in a nearby district with more reasonable rents. You might even find an appropriate space that's located midway between your clients and key suppliers such as printers or fabricators.

The amount of space you're looking for will be based on your company's head count (both full-time and part-time employees) multiplied by a certain number of square feet per person. Each industry has a standard range for this. In the design world, it's 250 to 350 square feet per employee. Design spaces tend to be large to accommodate the dynamic nature of our work. As a reference, the majority of other businesses range from 200 to 250 square feet per employee. At the lowest end of the scale, there are also businesses like call centers with just 150 to 200 square feet per employee.

Don't be confused by this rule of thumb — it does not represent the amount of personal space given to each individual employee. The calculation includes everything: individual work areas, walkways, meeting spaces, a reception area, storage, space for network servers, a packing and shipping area, space for books and reference materials, restrooms, and a kitchen. Using this rule of thumb, a 2,000 square foot space could comfortably fit a creative firm of 6 to 8 people. Carved out of that total area, each personal space would be about 100 square feet. Just as a comparison, the typical administrative cubicle in a corporation is about 64 square feet (8 feet by 8 feet), although personal space in corporations is currently on a downward trend.

If you're making these calculations because you're moving into a new space, be sure to leave yourself room to grow. If the new space seems too empty at the start, consider subletting a portion on a temporary basis to a friend. To keep this option open, you need to negotiate a master lease that allows you to bring in subtenants.

Configuring the space

The next big challenge for you is to configure the space to function well. Each design firm has to find the most appropriate mix of personal, team, and public areas. There are contrasting philosophies about how to do this. At one end of the spectrum, some firms choose to do all of their work in a single, large space. An open area that's shared by everyone is sometimes referred to as a "bullpen." The major benefit of this approach is that it encourages constant collaboration and information sharing. Employees have easy access to each other for brainstorming and feedback. It's also inexpensive to set up. The downside is that it can be very noisy with lots of distractions.

In complete contrast, you could take a more traditional approach and set up private offices. Separate, small spaces with doors that close are much quieter. This makes them well suited to tasks that require uninterrupted concentration, such as writing. The downside is that private offices can be very isolating. They're more expensive to build and can be difficult to modify once they're in place. Offices also take up more space (in the corporate world, they're often 150 square feet), which leaves less available for other uses.

Most design firms opt for a combination of open and enclosed areas. Here's what's included in the mix:

Personal space

Individual designers need large desktops to spread out work, an ergonomic arrangement of computer equipment, a way to store project files and binders, and a place to tack up reference materials. There has to be easy access to scanners and printers and a way to keep lighting and temperature at comfortable levels.

Team space

Designers also need space to collaborate. This might include a meeting table placed at the center of a shared work area, a long wall for critiques, and maybe even a separate room dedicated to one major project or client account, where reference materials can be accumulated and work in process can be displayed. (For more information about project workrooms, please see Chapter 22.) Apart from work areas, many firms also create a shared social space. This might be a lounge or, if it's large enough, the kitchen. Shared meals can be an important part of your studio's culture.

Public space

The public face of your studio begins with the reception area. When a client arrives for a meeting, it's important to make a positive first impression. There should be an adjacent meeting area or conference room. Even in an open-plan studio, this meeting area tends to be an enclosed space where lighting and sound levels can be controlled for presentations. It's helpful to have a large white board for brainstorming and a narrow ledge for showing work (sometimes called a "crit rail"). In large firms, the main conference room often has its own kitchenette and bathroom. This cuts down on foot traffic through the rest of the studio and helps protect the confidentiality of other accounts.

If you're planning to sign a lease for a space that's completely raw and unfinished, it will of course require a build-out. Even if you're moving into a space that has been occupied previously, chances are it will have to be remodeled. Both situations require careful negotiation with the owner of the building. Discuss how financial responsibility for the necessary improvements can be shared. Most landlords are willing to provide subsidies for improvements that increase the value of the property and make it more desirable to future tenants. A commercial real estate attorney can be an invaluable resource to you when negotiating these aspects of the lease agreement. The negotiation might focus on the cost of specific improvements, or it could lead to a general build-out allowance

that's calculated as an amount per square foot. Depending on the size and condition of the space, this rate can vary greatly. You'll also need to clarify who will oversee the work and what the required process will be for getting the final plans approved by the landlord before construction actually begins.

In general, leasehold improvements are structural or functional. They tend to be permanently attached or integrated into the building, such as plumbing and electrical wiring. In contrast, the term "fixtures" is used for items that could be removed and taken with you if you relocate. Your lease agreement should specify whether you are allowed (or perhaps required) to remove any fixtures at the end of the lease. If you have a long-term lease, it's fairly common for design firms to make comprehensive leasehold improvements — permanent modifications that tailor the space to your needs. With short-term leases, however, fewer changes are made. Often there's a narrower focus on the arrangement of furniture and equipment, and some of these items might even be rented from vendors rather than purchased.

As you make financial commitments, speak with your accountant about how they should be recorded on your books. For tax purposes, different items will be depreciated in different ways. In the U.S., most leasehold improvements to commercial buildings are depreciated over the course of thirty-nine years. With some leasehold improvements, however, it may be possible to shorten the depreciation schedule to match the term of your lease. Other categories such as fixtures, furniture, and equipment are depreciated more quickly. Federal tax codes change periodically and state requirements sometimes vary, so you'll want expert guidance from your CPA.

Build-outs and remodels require specialized expertise. As a designer, you may be tempted to take on projects like this entirely on your own. Think carefully before making this decision. Do you have the appropriate skills and experience, and do you have the time to spare from paid client assignments? It usually makes sense to bring in professional advisors from outside your firm.

Advice from a space planner might be free if he or she represents a company that sells contract furnishings or modular office systems (the consultation might be viewed as a marketing expense by that company). A qualified interior architect can work with you on a paid basis to analyze needs and develop plans, guide the selection of materials and fixtures, prepare blueprints and construction documents, coordinate any necessary permits, seek competitive bids from contractors such as carpenters and electricians, and monitor the quality of contracted work as it's being done. Obviously, all of this can make your life a lot easier! You'll also want advice from a computer network consultant on data and phone connections, on-site (and perhaps off-site) servers, and wireless capabilities.

The best configuration of your space depends on your particular situation and needs. Keep in mind that three of the most essential elements for creating comfortable work areas are good airflow, good lighting, and noise control. Many design firms have high ceilings but low interior walls. Private offices are few and tend to have a glass wall or glass door opening onto a larger, shared space. Open areas are not divided into boxy, corporate-style cubicles. Instead, flexible infrastructure and modular furniture systems can allow team members to be grouped into reconfigurable "pods" that place several collaborators (staff and freelancers) in close proximity to each other. Some firms put as many components as possible on wheels, making it easy to move desks, white boards, and partitions as needed.

As you go through the planning and construction process, be sure to keep your employees in the loop. Get early input from everyone who will be using the finished space. Ask what elements they would like to see. Be open to ideas, but don't let this request for input devolve into decision making by committee. It's important to have the involvement of all stakeholders, but it's also very important to maintain strong project leadership and clear decision-making authority.

A large project like this will take weeks or months to complete. During that time, provide regular updates to the staff. Uncertainty and lack of information can lead to anxiety. Reduce the stress of moving or reconfiguring by giving

employees as much information as possible. As the build-out process moves forward, take employees to see the empty space, show them blueprints, and perhaps even build models to help them visualize what the finished workplace will be like.

Many design firms also factor in some flexibility for individual employees by providing options for the final components that will go into their personal spaces. Allow workers to control what they can. Give them a chance to personalize their new workspaces by choosing from a pre-selected menu of items such as chairs, desks, tables, file drawers, bookshelves, and lamps.

When you're ready to occupy the finished space, orchestrate the actual move-in very carefully to minimize disruptions to daily activities as much as you can. There will be an adjustment period as everyone settles in, but client projects must go on!

Staying flexible

When it comes to facilities, the biggest challenge for creative firms is that needs are not static. Personal and team requirements change over time. Your firm will have turnover in staff, bringing new employees with different personal preferences. You'll also have to cope with larger adjustments as your mix of services evolves. For example, the space, lighting, and equipment needs for print design are different from those of Web development. What's ideal today may be less than ideal three years from now if the services that you provide to clients have changed. When laying out space, be sure to allow for growth and flexibility.