

Steelcase WorkSpace Futures,

Office Code: Building Connections Between Cultures and Workplace Design

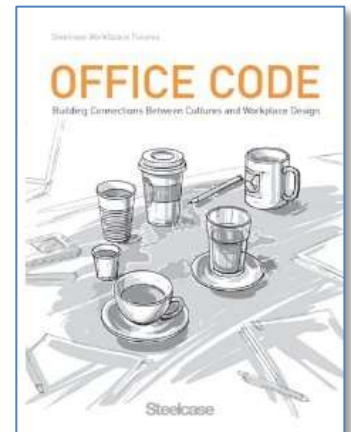
Alexander Koch Verlag (2009), ISBN-10: 3874228142, ISBN-13: 978-3874228145

Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at diversophy.com

What happens when a leading manufacturer of office furniture carefully examines the cultural workspace preferences of half a dozen customer nations and begins to successfully meet them? We might call it “office globalization.” *Office Code* is the publicly distributed report reflecting the research conducted by the Steelcase Corporation about culturally sensitive office solutions and their development. With the appearance of a colorful and attractive “coffee table” book, it is in fact a richly illustrated serious study that focuses on the exploration of cultural dimensions as they apply to work life and consequently to office layout and furnishings in the UK, Germany, Netherlands, France, Spain and Italy, with solid observations of the specifics as well as the communalities of European workspaces.

The global headquarters of Steelcase is in the USA, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which long ago established itself as the office furnishing capital par excellence. A few days ago I had the opportunity to visit the Steelcase offices in Paris and was treated to a tour of a living showcase of office outfitting, nestled within the confines of a relatively modest, elderly and traditional building on the Boulevard Jules Ferry. I could work there very comfortably. Both the visit and this book were a discovery for me in the way one might apply intercultural inquiry and know-how to the creation of functional space and furnishings.

Let’s take a closer look at *Office Code*. The Introduction explains how research leading up to its publication essentially applied Hofstedian dimensions, reinforced with other professional literature and hands-on research, to examine specifically how the cultural dimensions might affect workplace preferences and hence the design, layout and furnishings in the office cultures of the countries chosen.



After a particularly well-written and nicely illustrated chapter explaining the *Five Dimensions of Culture*, the book examines each of the specific European target cultures in terms of what the workday looks like, cleverly illustrated by cartoons depicting the critical hours and activities of the day. Included for each culture is a spatial profile illustrated by actual photos of office buildings and interiors and a cultural profile based on the dimensions, enriched by examples and anecdotes. Finally, most challenging, a space-cultural analysis of how and whether the spaces match cultural preferences of the users or, in fact, may be failing to do so as well as they could. These culture specific examinations are the better part of the volume.

However, the story is not fully told without a close look at how communication technology is changing the ways we work. It is estimated that up to 90% of work in some organizations today may be carried out with or over virtual media affecting the nature of space and when and how it is used. A chapter on “Adopting Distributed Work” deals with the demands of increased mobility and collaboration on the workers themselves, on the work processes and tools and on the requirements these place on space and design. Distributed work and work teams not only have different requirements, but the proliferation of mobile devices means that working spaces accommodate higher mobility, the roaming of individuals within and beyond the confines of the traditional office space and the sharing of unassigned working spaces. All of these trends pose functional design questions and, in many cases, raise the challenge of healthy ergonomics. The speed with which new technology is adopted in various industries and countries—also a matter of regional and organizational culture—features into the analysis of what will be needed in office design in different places.

The last sizeable portion of the book contains a pair of interviews and several case studies. These explore how collaboration of people from diverse cultures may not only benefit from well-designed workspaces, both in terms of productivity and satisfaction on the job, but also show how creative new synergies can occur in multicultural environments. The first interview seemed to me to suffer from the gap created by the interculturalists’ tendency to focus on the invisible bottom of the cultural iceberg and neglect evidence on top. More on this below. The second interview, on the other hand, is an insightful description of efforts made to “glocalize” the offices of a global consulting and business process outsourcing company. It succinctly describes the organization’s efforts, their degree of success, and their need to be ready for what is next in culturally sensitive and ever shape shifting global operations.

Google is the focus of the first case study. Most of us are familiar with the work/play nature of this organization and have seen photos of its playground “feel.” This case study looks at an EMEA engineering hub in Zurich, what it achieved and how Google can look forward to more architectural incarnations of their philosophy, even at a time of

financial constraint. The remaining case studies examine Steelcase's own Work Lab and WorkLife centers, located in Strasbourg, London and Rosenheim. There is a tantalizing but all too brief presentation of the preferences of employees at each of the three locations using the Pine-Gilmore *Dimensions of Customer Experience* scale—perhaps this approach needs more attention from intercultural researchers. However, the studies themselves are clear indicators of how corporate culture can take on quite a different expression in adjacent countries, even in the same organization.

Where does the path lead from here? A very short final chapter doesn't stress the word, but it is about "synergy," the possibilities of well-being in multicultural workplaces and the ability to realize these possibilities and go beyond them via awareness and respect for cultural needs. Synergy is what we expect from well managed diversity on the human resources level, but perhaps it is more evident by what is developed by cross-cultural collaborations in the material world, whether we are talking about fusion cooking or imaginative breakthroughs in the use of office appointments.

Certainly, there is a demand for new and more comprehensive research models. While the traditional dimensions used in this study are good starting points and offer the benefit of a consistent framework for cultural comparisons, they are aging and becoming less functional for today's complex multicultural contexts. One sometimes has the sense that in using the dimensional models, even in this particularly fluid and well written report, "the tail is wagging the dog," that is to say, that considerable real time inquiry, observation, exploration and reflection is needed to verify, qualify and explain the dimensions, rather than the dimensions providing adequate, ready and reliable insight into cultural values and behaviors.

Steelcase is doing its best to be a forward thinking, humane, and socially responsible organization. This book is not overt publicity for its work, but it is perhaps the best kind of advertisement, a model process and a tool developed by serious study and experience, offered freely to others to encourage and empower them to look carefully at the role of culture as they restructure or create workplaces that meet the demands of the organization's activity and the needs of its people for quality work life. *Office Code* begs us to look at how the place where people spend the greater part of their day can be made culturally and humanly friendly. The book includes a bibliography that reflects the breadth and multidisciplinary resources underlying this effort.

The publication of *Office Code* does not signal the end of a project as much as it marks the successful beginning of one. Currently Steelcase is pursuing research into cultural spaces beyond the EU core nations represented in this volume. The chief contributors to *Office Code*, Catherine Gall and Beatriz Arantes have each lived and worked in multiple countries and mastered a variety of workplace idioms. We thank them, along with those on their long list of acknowledgements, for what they have undertaken here, and we wish them well in the continuation of the Steelcase WorkSpace Futures Research effort.

A final note to the members of my profession who are likely readers of this review... As an interculturalist, I am used to dealing with the dynamics of cross- and multicultural interactions in workplace settings, both local and virtual. The bread and butter of my work is, however, about dynamics of communication, negotiation, social behaviors, etc., as they are driven by the values and beliefs of the cultures involved on national, corporate and professional levels. I instruct and coach individuals and groups on how to understand and respond in specific collaboration contexts or in doing business together.

My visit to Steelcase and my reading of *Office Code* made me realize how many of us, myself included, who call ourselves interculturalists tend to run "diving schools." We teach our clients and students how to explore the submerged mass of the cultural iceberg, the normally out-of-sight part consisting of the values, attitudes and features that support and express themselves in the 10% of culture which we claim to see above the waterline. We risk taking it for granted, Titanic notwithstanding, that everyone can easily see and appreciate what a culture is all about at eye level.

Thus I find it disconcerting that we so often tend *not* to examine what is spread out before us every day, the visible products, structures and concrete creations rooted in our cultural thinking. The world of intercultural consultants and trainers is, for example, surprisingly segregated from that of the professionals and institutions, both public and private, engaged in cultural expression and preservation. This is the domain of arts and artisans, academics, craftspeople and curators, as well as EU policy makers. By their efforts cultural heritage is protected and perpetuated in the form of visible, tangible and audible products, whether in museums or in situ. They provide support for ongoing cultural expression in terms of conferences, exhibitions, concerts and the like. Generally artifacts and performances are not our domains. Of course, there is an overlap here, but the cultural frontiers of the material world tend to be populated by commercial industries and their marketers more than by either the interculturalists or cultural curators. That being said, the Steelcase volume is, in a sense, a wake-up call for a more integrated involvement of those diverse groups whose business is culture and whose culture is business.