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All
Link
Event
Interview
Our Opinion
IdeaLists Update



Interview



Making cubicles cool: Architect and Entrepreneur Jerome Chang on the evolution of the modern workspace in an increasingly mobile world

Interview by The IdeaLists on 01.08.11

Back in 2007, when Jerome Chang left his position at [Clive Wilkinson Architects](#), he needed his own ideal workspace: an office that addressed rising location costs, digital information, worker mobility, and the surge of Generation Y into the workforce. Chang had worked on a team that pioneered modern work environments, such as the award-winning [TBWA Los Angeles offices](#) and [Google's Mountain View headquarters](#). When time came to create his own space, Chang brought a strong desire for community and evolution to the drawing board. The result: his new Los Angeles office evolved into a broader business that thrived as a coworking space—meaning a shared workplace for independent professionals from separate organizations. Chang's [BLANKSPACES](#) caters to freelancers and entrepreneurs who need reliable amenities and a vanity address without high overhead costs. The IdeaLists caught up with Chang to discuss the shifting landscapes of contemporary work culture.

How did the concept of coworking evolve for you as a business idea?

I didn't actually know anything about coworking until about two months before we opened. Before that I had studied the nomadic workforce cultures in cafes. Office hoteling [a desk reservation system used in the private realm to suit nomadic employees] and hot desking [temporary pop-up offices that originated in the late '80s] were similar ideas to coworking, but hot desking didn't involve reserving space, so people got pissed when there wasn't room for them. The problem I saw with telecommuting centers was that they were nowhere near as good as their corporate counterparts. Everyone knew it was minor leagues, so it wasn't an attractive place to go. I studied all these types of white papers and concluded that all this stuff had happened for 30 years, but always within the realm of a private company, never

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in a public realm. I simply took everything they learned and applied it to the public realm.

What are the advantages of a clearly branded, upscale coworking environment?

You'll want to come in more. Pay more and you'll use it more. Second, you present yourself better to your clients. There's a reason people spend lots of money on great lobbies and great office space. You present to your clients and potential employees who you are. It's a reflection of personality and culture. Several times I've not wanted to join a company because I couldn't stand their office space. I was like, there's no way I'm going to sit here for forty hours a week.

How can we compare the networking aspect of coworking to the interactive, user-centered features of Web 2.0, in other words, social networking?

In some ways you could think of it as Web 2.5. Because Web 1.0 was all about portals, and 2.0 was about engagement. Right? But it was purely online and virtual. There was never that level of face-to-face interaction that has been tried and true for thousands of years. This version here allows people to get that face-to-face interaction back into a social networking community. If LinkedIn had a store, this would be it.

So how did you incorporate a need for a successful face-to-face community into your workspace design?

It was a balance between what people perceive as privacy and what people perceive as open. Walls don't necessarily need to be solid. The top 12 inches of our cubicle walls are glass. You feel like something's around you so it gives you that feeling of intimacy, like a womb. But technically you're visually open, so you can make eye contact with people who walk by, people can see what you're working on, or just see who you are. All those little ingredients foster an active community and enable people to have these random discussions. It's really questioning what privacy means in an office.

What does strong community mean?

Comaraderie. I think you have to share similar ideologies with the people in your company or office. Fortunately here, most people are like-minded individuals. They're usually some kind of freelancer or entrepreneur, and their goal is simply to do better. There isn't backstabbing because it doesn't get you ahead. In a traditional office model, there are 10-20 people trying to appease the same boss. In our scenario we have 20 people all appeasing 20 separate, parallel bosses. When you eliminate that kind of politic, the only thing that remains is a need for friends and interaction. Just the good stuff.

Does the model of hierarchical work environments, boss/employee, still work?

No, The idea that you have bosses around the perimeter offices and the low level people in cubicles in the middle – all that is flattened even more because of the generation shift. You guys (points at me) are sometimes called the backpack generation because you carry all your work resources in your backpacks. All you need is a phone and a laptop. For this generation doing work in a cubicle or an office is quite antithetical to how they think. They do work everywhere else besides the office. We can look at Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg works in one cubicle. He doesn't work in one corner office despite all the top-secret, high-level strategic information he deals with. He's right in the open. I follow the same philosophy.

Do you ever want to escape BLANKSPACES?

I'm like everyone else. My ideal setting would be to work here

three days a week, two days at home. Actually be isolated once in a while, but still having a community to come back to.

The structure of Los Angeles can be compared to online, open networks of crossing information without a nucleus. What do you think about that in relation to community?

People in LA interact at 55 mph. We have to find more ways for people to interact. One reason why cities like San Francisco, New York, Paris and London do well for communities is because people walk by each other, they ride a bus together; they have to interact. Basically, they share space. Sharing is good. It's not for everyone, and a lot of people have forgotten how to share. But once you learn to share there are numerous benefits from it.



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