Architect
and Builder

Co-working Trend

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The international trend towards co-working, defined essentially as shared office space, equipment, and services, is set to change the office-space landscape in South Africa, as it is currently doing in Europe and other developed markets.

As Paragon Interface, an interior architecture company that has designed some of the largest and most iconic corporate headquarters of recent times in South Africa, including the Discovery Campus and Sasol Place, both in Sandton, we are seeing a growing move towards adopting this international trend locally.

A recent article on property24.com cited that, as economies diverge into a plethora of small to medium business entrepreneurs, and larger corporates realise the need for flexibility, the recent trend is increasingly towards 'shared' or co-working space. However, the fastest-growing sector here is large corporates, due to the flexibility of short-term real-estate contracts that can be tailored as business demands fluctuate.

Instead of maintaining and staffing a fully-fledged office building, a large corporate can now simply ramp up or down as new projects roll in or existing ones are completed. The key driver here is to cut real-estate costs, especially given the constrained global economic outlook and increasingly tight margins.

The major benefit of this trend for employees is that it supports what is termed 'agile' working, which is the logical next step of the open-plan office revolution. While traditional open-plan offices still tied workers to individual desks, and offered little in the way of shared services or collaborative working, 'agile' workspaces allow employees to work where and how they want to, with the full support and functionality required to do so.

There has been a key realisation that office-space design has to incorporate a social context with the explosion of technology in recent years enabling this cultural shift. Employees, especially the younger generations, do not particularly enjoy being confined to a single desk set-up in a multi-partitioned open-plan environment.

Savvy corporates, on the other hand, are understanding that not only is this bad for productivity and creativity, but that this

…has the potential to change office-space landscape in South Africa

is also a prime area where they can be more efficient with their real estate commitments whist driving staff engagement and wellbeing – resulting in measurable gains.

Therefore, agile workplaces represent the next stage of the open-plan revolution. What is needed is more collaboration and interaction amongst co-workers, which has resulted in concepts such as 'hot desking', which means that individual employees no longer have desks assigned to them personally, but simply utilise the office space as and when they require it.

As for the future evolution of the co-working trend, D'Adorante speculates that it could very well result in a paradigm shift in how major corporates are structured. Economies around the world are in constant flux, which means business is contracting and expanding all the time, while overheads tend to remain fixed. Suddenly there is a realisation that this no longer has to be the case, and that business has other options in how they utilise a traditional workspace.

However, there are a few key interior architecture principles that underpin effective co-working space design. Here it is important to design collaborative spaces that stimulate creativity and enable social interactions. But at the same time there is a very real need for private meeting spaces and quiet focus zones to balance all the activity.

Our design approach at Paragon Interface emphasises teamwork and collaboration over hierarchy and insular work practices. Key factors here are flexibility, so as to maximise space usage, and identify potential growth areas in the building; efficiency, which means creating multiple-use spaces; adaptability, so as to respond to changing requirements and technologies; and sustainability, which relates to 'green' and healthy work environments that support the wellbeing of all staff.

Additional criteria are privacy, which means adding quiet rooms, focus spaces, and concentrated work areas; using acoustic materials to minimise noise transference; dividing open spaces by means of planters, filing cabinets, low screens, and existing architectural elements to create a sense of personal space; and using colour and texture, in addition to stimulating furniture and fittings, to create dedicated team areas and neighbourhoods.