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THE ACTION OFFICE

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- Action Office frames knowledge work and its organization as a multi-faceted problem. Its elements describe an ergonomics of use. Work surfaces, display areas, shelf organizers, and task lighting are arranged to enhance the visibility of work in progress, with the idea that providing quick and intuitive access to information would augment decision-making. To mitigate the effects of sedentary office work on health and productivity, the components are set at a range of low and high heights to promote movement between sitting ad standing postures throughout the workday. (89-90)

- Yet what is most essential to the conceptualization of Action Office is how its elements come together as a re-configurable environment. Each element not only relates to its immediate user, but also works with other elements to allow for a wide variety of social spaces, circulation pathways, and privacy requirements, so as to constitute a system that could be calibrated to the changing needs of an organization. As systems furniture, the whole was meant to be greater than its individual elements. (90)

- For its user, Action Office would be a kinesthetic work environment offering comfortable and intuitive access to a visual and informational search space. For organizations, it would provide means of integrating workers into a reconfigurable diagram of interpersonal relationships and workflow. … It was intended as a responsive environment in which capacity to modify spatial relationships would also become means to maintain vital connections between worker, task and organization. (90)

- While it enjoyed a successful launch in 1965, disappointing sales and high production costs soon convicted De Pree that Action Office “did not live up to Probst’s concepts.” (90-91)

- The situation was resolved through a competition in which both groups were given three months to develop their respective proposals, on which basis the conceptual and design development of Action Office 2 was assigned exclusively to Probst. (91)

- Action Office 2 gained “considerable additional impetus” from a space planning technique developed in Germany (Office Landscaping). … Like the Action Office, the office landscape conceived of management as a process of influencing relationships at the scale of the task and in real time. … Probst concluded critically: the office landscape “is already over-methodized and locked into a too limited concept of organizational form,” while its furniture is “especially lacking” in “any components that would handle information display” or “integrate communications devices.” … A pedestal wall concept emerged which integrated combinations of furniture and wall components that could be rearranged, as needed, into highly varied groupings.” (92)

- Action Office 2’s innovation lay in the formlessness of its system, rather than the form of its objects. It was less a completed design than a technique for managing the space of work. (94)

- Office design increasingly fell under the purview of space planning, management consulting, facilities management, lighting and acoustic design and industrial design, with the role of architecture limited to providing enclosure. Like the postwar city, the postwar office became a touchstone in arguing what properly belonged to architecture. For some, architecture would gravitate toward the expanded field of environment design, seeking to “improve the connections between science and technology on one hand, and the humanities and social sciences on the other.” For others, architecture’s encounter with information and management constituted “a crisis of the ideological function of architecture,” to be warded off through critical theory or behind the reconstructed historical boundaries of architectural autonomy. (95)

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Branden Hookway, “Mobility as Management: The Action Office” in OFFICEUS Agenda, (Zurich: Lars Muiller Publishers and PRAXIS, Inc., 2014).