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'Office of the Future' competition finalists present concepts

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By Frank Jossi

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New office buildings will consist of shape-changing materials that allow them to produce as much energy as they consume. They likely will be made of precast materials, saving on time and costs, and have floor plates with fewer square feet devoted to workers because many of them will spend less time there.

Older structures will be retrofitted into more attractive spaces with corners transformed into atriums, retail at street level, and offices where walls and floors have been reworked into more creative spaces.

These are just some of the ideas offered Tuesday at the "Office of the Future" presentation sponsored by the NAIOP Commercial Real Estate Development Association and several other real estate-related organizations. The event, held at the Hopkins Center for the Arts in Hopkins, drew more than 350 people to hear the four finalists in NAIOP's Office of the Future competition. (Minneapolis-based RSP Architects received an honorable mention.)

Minneapolis-based Ryan Cos. US vice president of development Rick Collins, a judge in the national NAIOP contest, invited the finalists to the Twin Cities for another round of presentations. Collins has been in the news this week in announcing Ryan's \$400 million redevelopment plan that will include two 20-story office towers near the Vikings stadium in downtown Minneapolis.

Though architects represented four different firms on the East and West coasts, they generally agreed that future offices will have speak to a millennial generation of "digital natives" who want access to green space, public transit and to work in open, casual environments in sustainable buildings.

One structural approach that arose in the presentations was the idea of a second skin on new buildings that could help filter sunlight.

Michael Hickok, founder and principal of Washington, D.C.-based Hickok Cole, offered the concept of "a skin more like a plant that would change shape as heat and light change," he said.

The second skin would contract as the intensity of the sun's heat increased and open them as natural light dims. Floors will be free of columns and elevators and staircases will be "pushed" to the exterior sides of buildings rather than the more common placement in the middle of a building, said Hickok, echoing an idea suggested by the panel's other architects. A typical floor size could be 80 to 85 feet wide and 200 to 300 feet long, he said.

A building could have two electrical systems — direct and alternate currents — to allow for renewables such as wind and solar to plug directly into higher voltage systems.

"Most of what we showed today could be built today," he said.

The Miller Hull Partnership in Seattle offered the concept of more raw open space that could be customized by employees, said Craig Curtis, partner and lead designer. "The à la carte space embraces contemplation and collaboration," he said.

The Miller Hull firm designed such a building in Seattle, the recently opened Bullitt Center that bills itself the world's most sustainable structure. Among its many efficiency features are composting toilets, a rainwater capture and reuse system and a solar array largest enough to power the building's electric needs, he said.

The future offices will be in neighborhoods with plenty of services and restaurants, Curtis argues, so the buildings themselves may not have to have cafeterias, fitness centers or other accoutrements.



A second skin on new buildings could help filter sunlight, according to Michael Hickok, founder and principal of Washington, D.C.-based Hickok Cole, who offered the concept of "a skin more like a plant that would change shape as heat and light change." Hickok Cole is a finalist in NAIOP's Office of the Future competition. (Submitted Image: Hickok Cole)



New Haven, Conn.-based Pickard Chilton's concept includes precast materials, which the firm says have proved to reduce construction costs and time. Pickard Chilton is a finalist in NAIOP's Office of the Future competition. (Submitted Image: Pickard Chilton)

With architects serving as "building curators," a new structure will likely have retail, art galleries, supermarkets and other services in addition to offices above the ground floor, he adds.

A different spin on the panel came from of Shawn Gehle, design director of Los Angeles-based Gensler, who promoted the "hacking" of older buildings to adapt them to modern workers. He pointed out that the actual need for new buildings in the United States isn't large, which means that the challenge will be in renovating existing properties into more appealing spaces.

Buildings constructed after World War II could be revived in novel and radical ways. Taking as his example the FBI's much loathed fortress-like headquarters in Washington, D.C., Gehle added a retail mall on the roof and topped its flat roof with a soccer field.



Los Angeles-based Gensler suggested "hacking" the top off the FBI's fortress-like headquarters in Washington, D.C., and putting a retail mall on the roof with a soccer field atop the mall. Gensler is one of four finalists in NAIOP's Office of the Future competition. (Submitted Image: Gensler)

Corners sliced open to become atriums. Pop-out bays added visual appeal. Part of the building would become a hotel, or apartments, making for a mixed-use neighborhood, he suggested. The building is for sale, as it turns out, but Gensler's plan was more of a creative exercise rather than a potential reality.

Even so, Gensler's own office in Los Angeles' Bunker Hill business district was partly "hacked," with sections of a second floor jettisoned to create an open mezzanine level.

Reusing older buildings makes sense. "As office space per employee drops there will be an abundance of vacancy," he said. "Reusing buildings is the most sustainable thing you can do."

New offices will also employ precast materials that can reduce project lengths by as much as four months, according to Brett Spearman, a designer at New Haven, Conn.-based Pickard Chilton. Premade floor modules will allow for mechanical, electrical and lighting systems to be integrated into them much more quickly and easily, he said.



The Seattle-based Miller Hull Partnership's concept represents "a building that becomes a part of an agile, adaptable business machine, somewhere between a hands-on community and the raw edge of technology," according to NAIOP, which named Miller Hull one of four finalists in the Office of the Future Competition. (Submitted Image: Miller Hull Partnership)

By having so many prefabricated pieces available, a building owner could realize a 6.3 percent reduction in construction costs and a 20 percent reduction in construction time, he said. Data will be used to continually monitor energy use in new buildings, Spearman added, allowing owners to tweak systems for cost savings.

Panelists agreed that many of the challenges of creating future offices come in dealing with government regulation that don't allow for some innovations and from the way commercial real estate leases are written today.

Collins wondered if developers and builders in the future might charge a "cost per occupant" as opposed to a cost per square foot.

Hickok suggested businesses might pay more if they could see greater productivity. Better design, he said, makes "employees more efficient."



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