Office Interior Design 101

Office Interior Design 101: Everything You Need to Know

Current trends in the American interior design industry point total operating revenue reaching an estimated 16 billion dollars by the end of 2019. It's a large sum that indicates the sustained importance of quality design services within the U.S. market.

But contrary to what some might think such a high number indicates, interior design services don't have to be expensive and certainly aren't only for the wealthy. Point of fact: the American Society of Interior Designers believes good design "impacts lives;" thus, it's only reasonable that all people have access to it via feasible and affordable design options.

Office interior design, in particular, touches all of us in multiple ways, both as employees and as customers, encouraging productivity, stimulating creativity and building community. It can even improve our health and well-being!

Our team here at Key Interiors believes that quality office interior design is a critical part of a business's success. With this guide, we hope to convince you, too. Here's a list of the topics we'll cover:

- The What: A History of Interior Design (and Some Specifics Regarding Office Interior Design)
- The Why: The Benefits of Good Office Interior Design
- The How: The Elements of Good Office Interior Design

A History of Interior Design

Humans have designed the interiors of buildings for as long as they have been constructing them. Hindu, Roman and Greek mythology (among others) all reference a god of architecture (i.e., design); clearly our ancestors embraced and celebrated an early fidelity to the idea that great design is both of the human and of the divine.

Today's belief in God as the "Great Architect" (among Christian, gnostic and other philosophical traditions) only serves to solidify this notion — that the physical is improved by calculated design!

But myths and folk stories aren't the only evidence we have of an early appreciation for interior design; archaeological evidence also provides palpable proof of the various ways our human ancestors placed value on the form and function of the rooms around them.

In some ancient Egyptian tombs, for instance, scientists have discovered tiny replicas of Egyptian homes — called "soul houses" (pictured below) — that they believe were used as receptacles by ordinary Egyptians who wanted to ferry food and other provisions into the afterlife. Not only do these soul houses provide clues regarding the religious belief systems of the time, they also serve as retrospective blueprints for the interior design of ancient Egyptian houses.

Furthermore, scientists continue to unearth the actual remains of historic buildings from all time periods, giving us information about the design concepts used by different people throughout the centuries. From physical evidence we know that prehistoric humans decorated the walls of their shelters (pictured above); that Nabataeans from the 1st century B.C.E. experimented with paint and stucco and gilding techniques; and that Native Americans created buildings that honored the landscapes around them.

Discoveries from subsequent eras, as well as present-day examples, have yielded just as diverse design concepts, from the lavish Byzantine adornments, shapes and textures found in many Golden Age excavation sites to the decidedly more austere creations of the last fifty years that were inspired by the minimalist movement of Frank Lloyd Wright (pictured below).

The Birth of Interior Design as a Profession

While there's little doubt that humans have always recognized the importance of and tried to capitalize on the effects of good design, "Interior Design" as a true profession didn't take off until the first quarter of the 20th century. Up until this time, design had been more a product of intuition than innovation, facilitated by designers who were sensible and maybe artistic, but often had little formal design education and, thus, little knowledge of how or why something worked. They just knew that it did - that it was both pleasing to the eye and practical for everyday living.

For home interiors, this meant rooms were comfortable and decorated according to an individual's aesthetics. For office interiors, it most often meant workplaces had large, open rooms in which the majority of employees could sit and work together and then single rooms along the periphery in which their managers could observe them. There was a clear division of blue-collar and white-collar work in an attempt to enhance productivity based on the false belief that "intellectual" work could only flourish via quiet privacy but manual and clerical work demanded supervision and control to yield results.

As interior design continued to evolve, however, it grew dependent on a lot more than the way something looked. Functionality, along with scale, balance and proportion, became the hallmarks of good design, with mathematical and business skills replacing instinct and specialized technical knowledge replacing mere appreciation. It was during this time that the oft-quoted "form follows function" became the prescribed rule, guiding designers to focus more on creating effective spaces rather than purely pretty ones.

[Dorothy Draper](#) (pictured above with her signature design style) opened the first design firm in 1923, and by 1931 there was a trade magazine (Interior Design and Decoration), as well as the first of many trade associations (American Institute of Decorators, which by 1936 had changed its name to the American Institute of Interior Designers and is now known as the American Society of Interior Designers). In addition to her residential designs, Draper's focus on hotel spaces paved the way for specialization in office interior design and cemented her as one of the most important interior designers of the 20th century.

Under the shadow of her influence, businesses began to discover the value of making office design a part of their branding efforts, using physical space to enhance, not only the efficiency of their work, but the overall authority and appeal of their products and services.

In the following section, note how the focus of office interior design shifts from a strict facilitation of employee efficiency to a nurturing of employee and customer well-being, especially as we get closer to our current technologies and modern understanding of social, personal and corporate felicity.

Office Interior Design - A Timeline of Predominant Designs

Although spaces to conduct official business certainly existed in prehistoric and ancient eras, they were always incorporated within existing residential structures. Dedicated office buildings didn't become a "thing" until industrialization starting bringing workers in from the fields and into the cities. As manufacturing and economic activity grew, so did the objectives for office interior design:

Mid 1700s to mid 1900s - The Open Office Plan

During this period, office interior design was meant to facilitate as many workers as possible in a single space. Workers sat side by side along long tables, overlooked by managers, with little thought given to their comfort or health. Indeed, productivity was the main goal and managers commonly thought that people performed better when supervised. The ideas behind this system of thought were later elaborated on by Frederick Taylor in 1911 with his book, The Principles of Scientific Management, which served to extend the open office plan reign for another 50 years.

Taylor's calculated study of the work process, as detailed in his book, reaffirmed the value of dense, controlled environments since he claimed to have scientifically proven that they encouraged competition amongst workers and, thus, also encouraged greater productivity. As industrialization further provided the ingenuity for larger, taller buildings to be built, the open office plan was modified to include functional upgrades that could accommodate the congregation of even more people in one place, such as improved lighting and noise control measures.
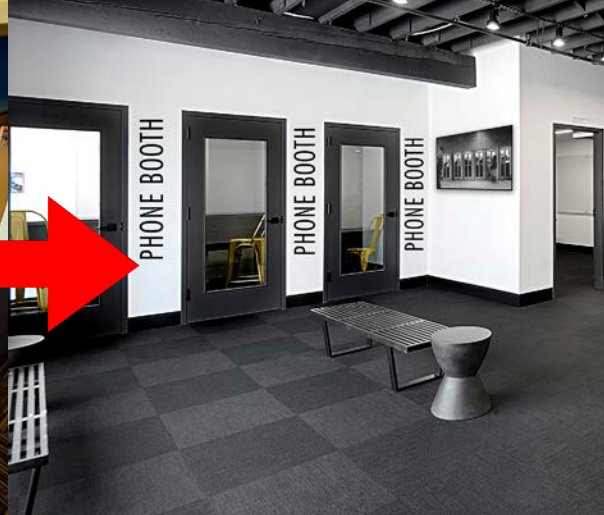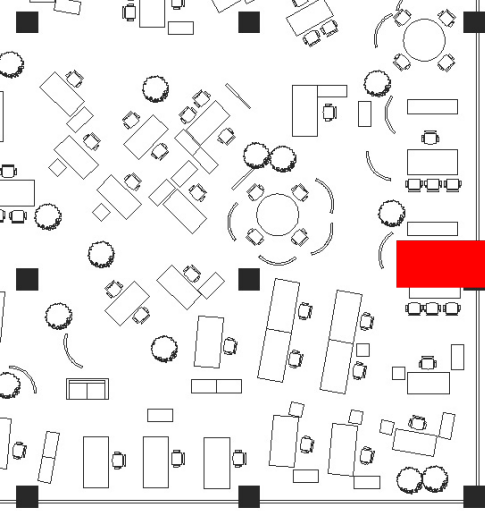
1950s to mid 1960s - Bürolandschaft
(German for "Office Landscape")

The effects of WWII and its aftermath created a desire for workers to feel connected to one another and less rigidly bound to hierarchical systems with top-down management. Thus, the open office plan was modified to create organic groupings of workers with similar tasks so that better communication and collaboration could occur. Gone were the long rows of tables and chairs. The furnishings of the traditional open floor plan were instead replaced with more comfortable options, along with warmer wall colors, interesting textiles and live plants.

Mid 1960s to 1990s - The Action Office Plan
(i.e., the "Cubicle")

As society continued to change, with more females entering the workforce and more emphasis placed on individuality, there came a push for workstations that provided privacy and a reprieve from the noise of the open office plan. The answer was a modular system of interlocking panels that could be set up in different configurations to meet the needs of whoever chose to use it. It was a revelation in office design and ushered in a flexibility that hadn't previously existed.

1990s to Today - Modern Office Interior Design

Nevertheless, the cubicle, like those office interior design plans before it, has given way to even more organic designs as technology continues to offer ways of doing a job that don't always involve sitting at a desk at all. Modern office interior design is exciting because the possibilities are as diverse as the technologies that can facilitate them. This fact, coupled with a deeper appreciation for the human spirit, mean today's office designs are more revolutionary, more stimulating and even more healthful than before!

The Benefits of Good Office Interior Design

Throughout its history and many iterations, office interior design has always endeavored to improve the lives of the people it touches. Take a look at some of the best reasons to invest time, money and effort into the interior design of your office:

- **It Motivates Employees** - A nice space stimulates the senses and excites people. It makes them want to be present, work harder and stay longer.

- **It Increases Productivity** - A functional office layout makes it easier for people to work. And isn't that the goal? A space that is free of clutter, that provides the necessary accommodations for the tasks at hand (desks for people who want to work at desks; rooms for private negotiations; etc.), means employees aren't hindered from doing their jobs in the way that best suits them. Just adding carpet and/or acoustical panels can improve work output by blocking sounds that might impede concentration or cause distraction.

- **It Boosts Efficiency** - Being able to walk easily through an office might sound trivial, but it impacts an employee's access to equipment and, thus, it impacts his or her performance. Think about it: if everyday you have to walk down the hall to print something, or wait in line at the restroom, or get up from your desk to answer a phone, you're wasting time that could be spent doing something truly productive. And wasted time is wasted money. A good office interior design plan helps establish an efficient work flow so that employee time is spent on tasks that matter.

- **It Strengthens Your Business Brand** - An office is more than a place to make calls, answer emails and create spreadsheets and reports. It's also a [clear indication of your goals and priorities as a company](). Your office layout, along with the furnishings and decorations you choose, combine to create an ambiance that showcases the things you value most. With it, you give employees, as well as clients/customers, another tangible reason to identify with your vision (or not).

- **It Attracts Clients, Customers and Employees** - Not only does good office interior design show that you respect your employees and customers enough to provide them with comfortable working and meeting spaces, it encourages them to linger and do business with (and for) you. A cheery atmosphere that's clean, functional and relaxing attracts people to you.

- **It Reduces Operating Costs** - A quality office interior design can reduce utility costs by maximizing natural light, airflow and alternate energy sources. It can also facilitate the [use of technologies]() not accommodated by outdated spaces, saving you time and money. For instance, a new space might incorporate a room with built-in video capabilities, allowing employees to have virtual meetings rather than face-to-face ones (where the costs of transportation and time away from a desk quickly add up).

- **It Improves Health and Well-Being** - A office interior design plan can ultimately improve the health and well-being of the people who use it. Natural light can be utilized to boost mood; collaborative and social spaces can be incorporated to encourage relaxation; air quality control measures can be implemented to alleviate allergens and dust; and ergonomic furnishings (like standing desks, footrests and ball chairs) can be used to relieve daily bodily strain.

The Elements of Good Office Interior Design

Although the main elements of interior design remain the same whether you're designing a residential or commercial space, there is one major difference between the purpose of the two. Home interior design rests entirely on the client's own personality, tastes and habits, as well as his or her desired way of living. Office interior design, however, must accommodate the needs of both the client and the public, a sometimes complicated order when diverging interests pit client wants against public demands and vice versa. Regardless, these are the elements all good design considers:

- **Functionality** - First and foremost, an office design should "work." It should serve as a catalyst for work productivity and meet the needs of both the company and the people it serves. In essence, good design makes work easier, more efficient and more effective.

- **Brand Identity** - An office's interior should display its culture and history. It should also highlight the company's values and vision. Consider both your employees and the people you serve, and create a space that accurately reflects what you want them to see. A cohesive branding strategy that spans the breadth of your customer experience helps set you apart from the competition and inspires customer loyalty.

- **Creativity** - Good interior design is purposeful, but it should also be innovative. Use an office interior design project to think outside the box. A good office is unique, representing your style and considering the needs of your employees, clients and shareholders.

- **Flexibility** - A good office interior design is also one that can be easily adapted should the need arise. Whether positive or not, change happens. Good design elements can be modified when, not if, the time arrives.

- **Well-being** - Good office interior design promotes the well-being of all the people in it: employees, clients, even the delivery man. Use a variety of elements (like lighting, communal and private spaces, ergonomics, acoustics, colors, textures, HVAC and ventilation systems) to help reduce mental and physical stress, improve mood and stimulate creativity.

- **Budget** - Of course, good design is easy with an unrestricted amount of money to pay for it. But it's also just as feasible with limited funds. The trick is picking a budget and sticking to it. A good design partner can help you design, build and furnish a space that meets your needs without breaking the bank.

In Conclusion

Office interior design is an important part of a business's branding, impacting the effective operation and, ultimately, the bottom lines of companies large and small. Our team here at Key Interiors has completed over 300 successful office renovations and redesign projects for all kinds of companies.

Contact us to learn how a quality office interior design plan can improve employee satisfaction, boost productivity, build trust, foster community relations and bolster mental and physical fitness for you, your team and the people you serve.

CONTACT US
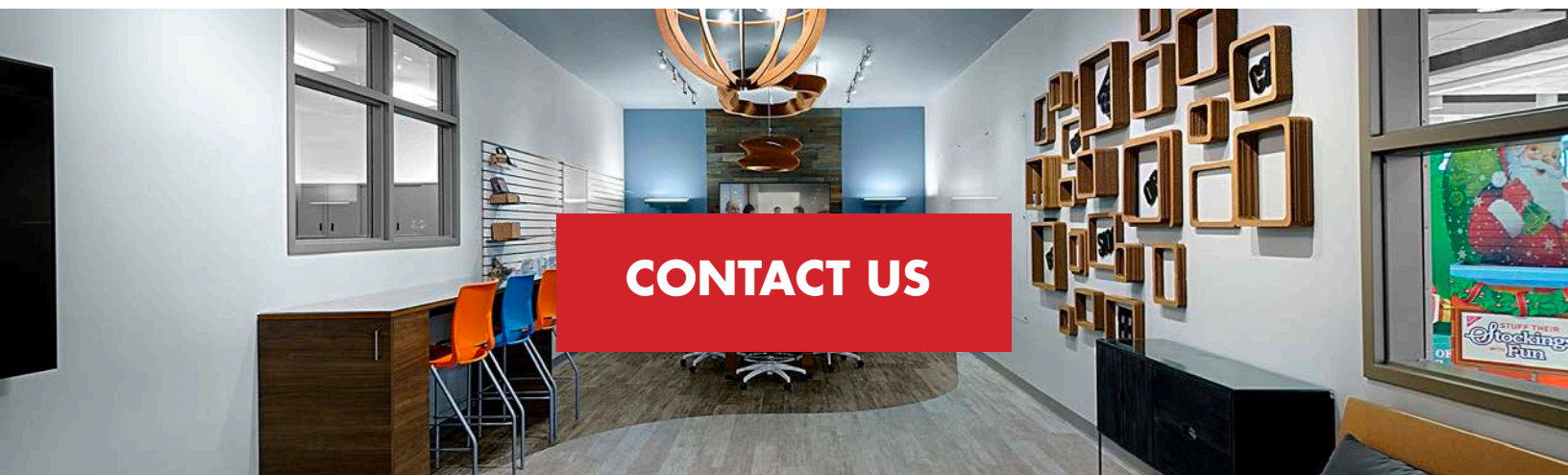
About Key Interiors

DESIGN | BUILD | FURNISH

Established in 1978, Key Interiors is a complete interior resource assisting clients with any facility re-design, expansion or relocation in mind. Located in Chicago, our office design firm offers a comprehensive range of services including design-build, architectural design, construction management plus a design center with over 300 lines of office furnishings & contract furniture.

We are project management specialists capable of managing your project from initial office design to completion. Our team of forward thinking collaborative partners have over 30 years of experience and a track record of 300+ successfully completed office renovation projects including corporate offices, dental offices, healthcare waiting rooms, car dealerships and more!

We know profitable office environments today are fast paced! The right workplace can foster excellent work-group collaboration, increased productivity and streamlined processes.

Let us design an interactive workplace for you!
Give us a call or send us an email today:

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