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OFFICES HAVE EVOLVED

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written by Wendy Thomas, Telegraph Correspondent

Offices have evolved over the years. Gone are your corkboard and white-cubicked cubbies of yesterday. Designing office spaces these days takes more than just painting the walls, placing a plant in the corner of the room and doing work the way it's always been done. Offices now are creatively designed based on the overall impression, what mood best defines the office and how the work is performed. When designing an office space, the biggest mistake people make is to have four straight walls and paint them all white, said Pat White, owner of Space Planning and Commercial Environments in Nashua.

"People think it is a clean and safe look, but it gives the eye nothing to look at. It does not inspire creativity or comfort," she said.

Instead, White uses colors, textures and curved walls when designing office spaces. She's worked with clients such as Transparent Language and Cooking Matters in Nashua to convey a sense of creativity and energy to their customers.

"There are so many textures to work with," White said. "For example, we designed an elevator down in Boston where we used three different types of plastic-textured laminate on the walls. The surface treatment became the artwork."

White also uses curved, painted or textured walls to break up the narrowness of some workspaces. "It all depends on how the space is going to be used," she said.

White has noticed that colors have become more vibrant over the years.

"It's a younger working generation - the days of stuffy law firms have gone by the wayside," she said. "Colors, these days, need to reflect the energy and creativity of the current work force."

White told how she had worked on one large facility where they chose to use the color red.

"There is a psychology of design," she said, "and most people will tell you not to use red in an office. They associate red with anger, but it can make people relax and feel comfortable. It's the perception you want of warm and inviting."

Another mistake people make when designing offices, according to White, is to use parabolic lighting, which are recessed lights in the ceiling that emit a hazy glow. "They create a sort of cloudy-day syndrome," she said.

Instead, White prefers to use bold lighting such as halogen lamps.

"It's all about that sense of energy that you want to convey to your clients," she said.

Robin Holohan, interior designer and owner of Marchant & Mann in Merrimack, said that when decorating an office, people need to decide how the spaces are going to be used and how people will get their work done in those spaces. Some questions she asks clients before decorating an office are: o Will there be any private areas for the workers? o Are customers going to come into the office? o Will children be expected in the office area?

Once she has answers to "There are some things that all offices need," Holohan explained. "Examples are areas of flooring, handles to doors and walkways that are barrier-free. It's the kind of mood that is wanted that then decides how and with what these offices are decorated.

"For example," she continued, "if someone wants a bright cheery office, you might use lots of geometrics, casual fabrics and simple window treatments. If an office is to feel peaceful, you would use a softer palette with more natural elements like grasses and plants. You might even incorporate sounds into the office environment."

Sue West, an office organizer and owner of Space4U in Amherst, gets called in to organize existing offices and also to create new efficient office workspaces.

"I work with a lot of home offices, where people have gotten too much business and can't keep in control of the stuff they find (themselves) collecting," she said. "Disorganization detracts from your ability to do efficient work and leaves a negative impression on your clients."

When West is called in to organize an office, she first talks with a client to decide what is frustrating them about their office and what they cannot do because of the disorganization.

"Sometimes it's simply a piece of the office, like the layout of a desk, that needs to be reworked and sometimes it's the whole thing," West said.

She said paper material seems to be a universal problem in all offices.

"People just have too much paper coming into their offices," she said. "It gathers and, pretty soon, you don't even know what you have. A good technique is to pull out just the important papers needed for your work and then either get rid of unnecessary papers or archive them. Too much uncontrolled paperwork get in the way of you doing your job."

Organizers found at a number of stores have quickly become popular in helping people have a more useful space.

"We have become a multimedia culture, and one thing I've seen that is very popular in organized offices are clear plastic three-sided folders," West said. "People usually work on projects, and I've seen them use these clear folders to keep mail, papers and CDs together, and the materials do not fall out. We are also becoming a more visual society, and simple tools like those clear folders make office life a lot easier."

Working at home is important to many of West's clients, who need a completely separate space to get their gears going.

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"Many of my customers are people who are taking their home offices seriously," West said. "They are no longer content to have a desk in the living room and be surrounded by toys. I'm seeing that people want a real home office that is defined from the rest of the house. Offices are now being designed to allow people to work better, be more efficient and be more creative."

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