Steven J. Bell

We're all about openness

Except when it comes to our workspaces

When it comes to information access, academic librarians are advocates for openness. They demonstrate a strong commitment to creating cultures of openness at their institutions, leading the way for others to grasp the power and benefits of open access publishing, open education practices, open data sharing, and more. Breaking down information barriers while establishing pathways to unfettered and free access is a core professional value. It's probably safe to say that academic librarians have yet to encounter an open concept they refuse to embrace. Well, there might be one exception.

If the conversation at the 2022 Designing Libraries IX Conference, held November 6–8, 2022, at Temple University serves as an indicator, academic librarians are still quite wary of, and at times downright oppositional to, the open office concept. No other topic raised at the program generated as much conversation. In the one program session that addressed open offices, there was debate on the potential benefits and pitfalls of open offices. Administrators asked for suggestions on how to get library staff to be more open to the possibility of open office space. Librarians questioned how they could effectively perform their duties in open workspaces. Architects and designers offered their advice on how to make it work—or when they thought it wouldn't. When an attendee asked me, during a conference library tour, about my office in the relatively new Charles Library at Temple University, I invited them to visit it with me. Assuming that as a senior library administrator I had my own office, this colleague was taken by surprise when I led them to my workstation/cubicle and asked, "How do you like it?"

Based on my experience at this Designing Libraries conference (given the reaction of attendees at this session) and despite all the talk about open offices in academic librarianship, both pro and con, one thing is clear: few practitioners, at any level, appear to have actually visited and learned more about open office environments from those who work in them. This article, written from the perspective of an open office dweller who no longer has their own private office, seeks to provide an objective look at the open office environment. As our libraries emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic and we draw from that experience the potential of remote and hybrid work practices, academic librarians who are engaging in redesign, renovation, and building projects must face the question of whether private, dedicated offices still make sense. When these decisions are made, no doubt with the constraint of limited space, will our allocation decisions be determined by a user-centric or worker-centric mindset? Can a balanced approach be found?

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Open office debate

Whatever an individual's personal perspective is on open offices, whatever their library role, they will find literature to support their position. Hate open offices?[1] There is an abundance of articles that elaborate on the ways in which they lead to low productivity and lower worker morale. Want to make the case for open offices? There's no dearth of information singing the praises[2] of how the open office concept contributes to worker idea pollination and staff engagement. Opponents will point to the lack of privacy, disruptive

The natural light-filled, smaller administrative office area has fewer workstations but are of the same type used by all staff.

noise, and other disturbances that contribute to a decrease in productivity. Supporters sees increases in serendipitous worker interaction, the creation of a more equitable workplace void of office status, and cost savings that maximize resources. My perspective is that open offices are neither as bad as opponents, nor as good as supporters, make them out to be. The outcome ultimately depends on factors such as design, planning, communication, and setting agreed-upon workplace norms—for starters.

Rather than debate whether open offices are the worst or best thing that ever happened to workers, we should focus on how to make open office environments productive and satisfying for all library workers. With flexible work arrangements becoming more acceptable in academic libraries for workers to whom it is an option, the prospect of private, dedicated offices being a part of future renovation or new building projects is questionable. In addition to costs saved by eliminating private offices, where staff work offsite two or more days a week, the need for a private office diminishes. Library buildings designed for the future, as was Temple's Charles Library, must offer the next generation of inhabitants maximum flexibility to adapt spaces to the needs of the current users. Building private offices is expensive for new projects, as well as far more expensive to remove for future projects. Whatever you might think about open offices today, if your vision is future-oriented, then the flexibility and desirability of open office space is worth consideration.

The open office decision

Temple University Libraries had the good fortune to engage in a new building project because of the inadequacies of its then 50-year-old building. The availability of a building space at the center of campus, along with the extreme high cost of renovation, convinced the administration to opt for new construction. That led to a series of numerous building and service design decisions. For example, would the building use traditional and compact shelving or an automated storage and retrieval system? Would it feature traditional desktop-oriented computer labs or a mobile-first laptop approach[3] that would eliminate hundreds of thousands of dollars in electrical and wiring infrastructure costs? To what extent would building design address contemporary student needs as opposed to aiming for maximum flexibility for future building inhabitants? Decisions about a centralized service point,

Offering a more industrial vibe, the larger staff area takes advantage of natural light from a room-wide floor-to-ceiling window.

instruction spaces, and co-located student services were among the many major choices needing to be made. But of all the decisions facing the building planning team, none created quite as much tension between the planners and staff as the decision to eliminate all private offices in favor of open staff areas.

In the existing Paley Library, nearly all administrators and librarians had private office space. Offices conveyed administrative or professional status. For librarians, they could communicate a personal style. Other workers, typically in administrative, access, and technical service areas, always had assigned desks in open spaces. As part of the new building planning process, there was a detailed analysis of existing staff space, both offices and open work areas. In conceptualizing and planning new staff areas, the design team recommended an open office arrangement for all staff. Given the need to maximize student seating and study spaces, it was apparent that space constraints made it impossible to give all those with existing offices a similar private footprint in the new building.

Despite their awareness of the potential pitfalls of open offices and how existing office owners would react, the building design team made the difficult choice. In support, the designers touted the potential benefits of open office environments, such as increased collaboration, serendipitous idea generation, or simply more opportunities for staff engagement. What tilted the scale in favor of open offices, ultimately, was student-centered design. Given the choice between more amenities and study space for students or giving select staff a private office, the choice was clear. While most staff were disappointed by this decision, they understood and accepted it. To their credit, the building planners and space designers were already developing a strategy to provide a workspace environment that would address staff concerns related to the openness of it all.

Making an open office work

Where open office environments are less successful, it often results from a conversion of existing private offices to one where staff shift to an open arrangement. That approach is akin to fitting round pegs into square holes. The final product will lack some or all of the necessary design elements and amenities a born-open space provides. On the surface, the "private-to-open" conversion can achieve the goal of creating more user-centered spaces in the library, but an underlying culture of resentment is likely to persist if the negative qualities of open offices go unaddressed. Anecdotal evidence from libraries that experience this type of transition suggests staff will be bitter about losing their offices. They gain little in return to accommodate their needs, such as additional private meeting rooms, natural lighting, or necessary acoustical treatments or eye-friendly light technology.

Here are features, based on the Temple University Charles Library experience, that can contribute to a more successful conversion to or design of an open office workspace:

- Quality workstations that facilitate staff productivity while offering a degree of privacy. Situating workstations in an arrangement that promotes staff visibility facilitates a more collaborative workspace.
- A single workspace design for all workers helps to instill a greater sense of workplace equity than private offices of different sizes and locations. That said, even open offices will have some locations that are more desirable than others.
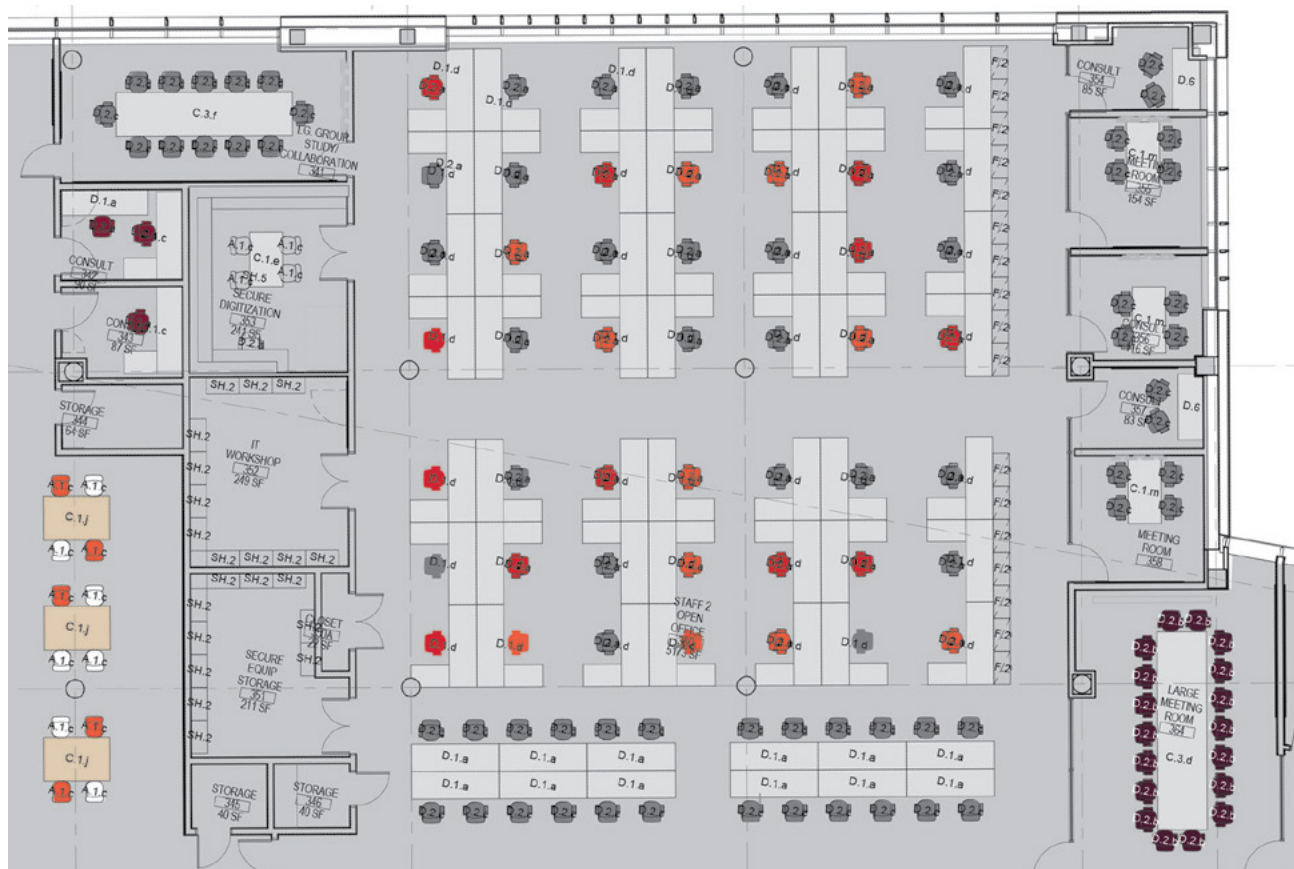- Established workplace norms achieved through research, staff focus groups, and recommendations from colleagues can lead to a consensus on appropriate behaviors related to noise levels, impromptu meetings, socialization, phone calls, food consumption, and more. Staff working together to address the causes of low productivity and morale often associated with open office environments can reduce or eliminate the most undesirable actions and distractions.

The main staff area features casual alternate seating and gathering spaces.

- Abundant, large windows that offer natural light throughout the day, supplemented by indoor lighting that automatically adjusts as needed to complement natural light.
- Identify practices that establish signals for how staff interact in the open office environment. Headphone use, for example, can indicate a no-interruption mode.
- Construct adequate rooms convenient to the open office space that offer privacy for phone calls, supervisor-supervisee meetings, group meetings, chat service support, and any other activities that would create noise and distraction in the workstation area; create rooms that hold two, four, six, or more workers to provide multiple room occupancy options. Then make it easy to reserve rooms with a calendar system.
- Design the workstation layout to minimize walking patterns to discourage constant interruptions or distractions caused by passersby traffic.

These are just a few of the types of recommendations one can locate[4] in the open office literature that are based on successful workplace practices designed to minimize the most challenging elements of open office environments while maximizing what helps them to succeed. Though overlooked at Charles Library, incorporating biophilic design elements[5] into the open office area can positively contribute to staff well-being.

Bringing equity to academic library staff space

In a January 2023 issue of his blog newsletter,[6] well-known higher education analyst Jeff Selingo predicted that faculty offices are likely to be on the chopping block for a number of reasons, from the cost of maintaining personal offices and eventual renovations to an expectation that faculty will be more visible and accessible when they are on campus. Traditional office hours are likely to be a thing of the past. Selingo writes:

Private offices have been a fact of life for faculty for centuries. Having a private office connotes stature in the campus hierarchy. As a result, expect lots of debates and handwringing as campuses rethink faculty spaces to become more student-centered. I visited the two of the college's six campuses last week as faculty toured mock-ups of the new spaces. The new buildings will do away with the traditional private office in favor of a "palette of spaces" that include open work areas, huddle rooms, and enclosed focus areas that are private.

Selingo's observation for faculty workspace is likely applicable to the library administrative and professional class as well. Claiming that professional librarian status and the nature of that work requires a personal private office is likely to ring hollow as campus space is reconfigured for a more hybrid work future. Past perspectives that determine who among library workers is assigned a private office establishes a hierarchy based on status. Staff lacking master's degrees in library science rarely have private offices or they share an office with multiple co-workers. The existence of private offices in academic libraries, along with their size and location, establish these spaces as status symbols within library facilities.

Those libraries that eliminate private offices in favor of open office environments will move the organization in the direction of eradicating the private office as status symbol. If our profession is truly committed to eliminating systemic structures that divide rather than unite staff based on worker status, let's consider breaking down the barriers that hierarchical workspace systems have built in library facilities. A profession that seeks to create equitable

and inclusive spaces for the people who use the library but allows its worker spaces to perpetuate a system of inequality should recognize the value in this change. For those who have yet to experience open office space, but instead base their perceptions on the literature that characterizes them as a worker purgatory, it's time to develop a more welcoming and open mind to working in an open office.

Conclusion

To be sure, open offices are far from perfect. Everyone will at some point do something that annoys their fellow open office dwellers. Food odors. Ringing cell phones. Colleagues chattering away. And there is no personal, private office to escape to. With fewer staff showing up at the office on any given day—as remote work is an increasingly available option—these annoyances diminish over time. With the right design and worker norms in place, any undesirable behaviors are further diminished. Granted, losing a personal, private office is hard. Thinking of the transition in this way may allow for a more positive mindset. When moving from a private office to an open office, move beyond focusing on what you lost. Focus instead on the space improvements gained by those who use the library. In that respect, the decision to transform from private and closed to open and shared supports our essential core values. If it's less than objective to state that this proposition is a "no-brainer," this author pleads guilty. ✄

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. Katherine Schwab, "Everyone Hates Open Offices. Here's Why They Still Exist," *Fast Company*, January 15, 2019, https://www.fastcompany.com/90285582/everyone-hates-open-plan-offices-heres-why-they-still-exist; Katherine Schwab, "The Science of Why You Hate Your Open Office," *Fast Company*, May 2, 2019, https://www.fastcompany.com/90342214/the-science-of-why-you-hate-your-open-office; David Brooks, "The Immortal Awfulness of Open Plan Workplaces," *New York Times*, September 8, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/08/opinion/open-plan-office-awful.html.

2. Alan Henry, "Simple Desk Improvements That Make An Open Office Easier to Bear," *New York Times*, August 21, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/smarter-living/work-desk-improvements-office.html; Ashley L. Dunn, "An Architect's Defense of Open Plan Offices," *Fast Company*, August 15, 2018, https://www.fastcompany.com/90218754/in-defense-of-open-offices; Katharine Schwab, "This is the Ultimate Anti-Open Office," *Fast Company*, September 19, 2018, https://www.fastcompany.com/90238559/this-is-the-ultimate-anti-open-office.

3. Steven Bell, "Moving to Mobile: Spaces as a Service in the Academic Library," *EDUCAUSE Review*, April 15, 2022, https://er.educause.edu/articles/2022/4/moving-to-mobile-space-as-a-service-in-the-academic-library.

4.	"Open Office Etiquette and Ground Rules," Coworking Resources, March 14, 2019, https://www.coworkingresources.org/blog/open-office-etiquette-and-ground-rules; Jacqueline Whitmore, "9 Rules of Open Office Etiquette," *Entrepreneur*, May 24, 2016, https://www.entrepreneur.com/living/9-rules-of-open-office-etiquette/276238; Rebecca Knight, "Staying Focused in a Noisy Open Office," *Harvard Business Review*, October 11, 2018, https://hbr.org/2018/10/staying-focused-in-a-noisy-open-office.

5.	Steven Bell, "Impact of a Green Roof on Student Study Space Preferences: Does Biophilic Design Matter?" (poster presented at ACRL 2023, March 17, 2023), https://scholarshare.temple.edu/handle/20.500.12613/8404.

6.	Jeff Selingo, "The Calculator For a New Generation," *Next*, January 2023, https://jeffselingo.com/newsletter-archives/the-calculator-for-a-new-generation/.