

## **Global Collaboration: Erasing Distance**

**Space matters. It shapes the behavior of people and creates the ‘stage’ on which innovation can be propelled**

To drive growth and leverage the strength of a globally integrated organization, it was critical that the team solved for new ways of working, Steelcase knew it could develop more innovative ideas if it effectively engaged a diverse group of thinkers, located around the world. The new innovation center needed to consider the needs of employees who were joining the team virtually and try to minimize or eliminate any disparity they might experience. All of the key ingredients of global creative collaboration needed to be thought through, from IT systems to organizational culture.

“We approached the project from a user-centered perspective on what we need as an organization that will help us innovate,” explains Patricia Kammer, one of the researchers on the project. “A big question was how do we design space in a way that will encourage cross-pollination, sharing of ideas and making thinking visible across different disciplines?”

Members from Steelcase’s globally distributed WorkSpace Futures team use telepresence in the Insights Lab daily to collaborate with colleagues globally

“From the start, this project was about connecting our global network. The new space would be just one node on a larger network,” says Kammer.

**We needed to make distance evaporate.**

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**KAMMER**

Today 75% of Steelcase’s product development projects are global, with design studios in Europe, Asia and North America, plus external partners. John Small, Steelcase’s director of design in Europe, and John Hamilton, Steelcase’s design director for Asia Pacific, lead multi-national teams—French, German, Spanish, American and Chinese team members work in collaboration with each other as well as the research and marketing teams . It’s important to put everyone on a project team “in the same room” virtually whenever needed, notes Small. Team interactions also increase the likelihood that individuals will reach out to each other directly to solve problems. Teams are in touch daily via telepresence as well as through other technology tools to collaborate. “Distance shouldn’t be considered a barrier,” Hamilton says.

## **A PALETTE OF PLACE, POSTURE AND PRESENCE**

Open plan collaboration areas (adjacent to the Professional Hub) are well equipped with whiteboards and technology tools, such as media:scape, allow the industrial design team to easily connect and collaborate.

The new innovation center offers a range of spaces that people can choose from, depending on the type of work they need to do throughout the day, and encourages them to move throughout the space rather than stay in one place. Everything is transparent: glass walls allow workers to see their ideas progress from concept to reality. Walls have become the new worksurface, and information lives on vertical planes where everyone can see it. Areas for respite, both indoors and outdoors, allow employees to get away without going away. The space tells workers that it is ok to stand, lean, perch, lounge or work in any posture that is comfortable and helps them to stay energized and focused. The environment encourages people to experiment and try new things.

“We wanted to have a place where we could make and break things,” says Ludwig, not entirely tongue-in-cheek. “We wanted to help move ideas from the computer screen to prototypes as quickly as possible. Design is a very physical process.”

“The space is not overly prescribed,” says Johnson, whose design team partnered with Shimoda Design group for the interior architecture. “Forces of change happen over time. This is a simple architecture that gives humans access to natural light, daylight views, the simplicity of a raised floor that has modular power and under-floor air delivery. It’s a simple floor plate designed for evolution, so we can adapt it and allow the building to ‘learn’ with the people who use it.”

The Mobile Neighborhood provides both individual and small group spaces for workers away from the activity of the Project Studios.

## **HOMES FOR PROJECT TEAMS**

As the team considered how to best support a culture of innovation, one of the paradigms they needed to shift was to move from thinking about home bases for individuals to homes for project teams. This meant they focused on spaces that would support team-based work, flanked by front porches to support individuals and small groups and back alleys where work moves from concept to reality. The project studios, at the heart of the center, were allocated 40% of the overall footprint and are the places that product development teams call home.

The studios have been carefully planned to support remote team members as well as those who are physically present. “During the behavioral prototype stage, we saw that people tend to behave in a very forced and

formal way during telepresence meetings. They sit up very straight, as if they're TV news anchors, and are reluctant to move," explains Ritu Bajaj, a Steelcase researcher. "Having a variety of applications in the room, such as café tables and lounge settings, enhances informality, which makes for much better collaborative experiences."

Every studio features videoconferencing in a multiscreen format, which assures people can see each other and their content. The room supports different configurations and views, including close-up and one-on-one exchanges where gestures and facial expressions transmit clearly, improving understanding and contextual awareness. The studio layout assures everyone can be on camera during videoconferences, and ceiling-mounted speakers ensure audio clarity. There are zones in the studios where workers can break away from active collaboration but stay nearby to rejoin as needed.

**"In the past, if people were at their desk working, they were considered productive. Now the project studio is where most of the work happens."**

The Front Porch area outside each Project Studio serves as a touchdown space for these members of the Integrated Technology team. Screens provide constantly streaming data about the project.

Project studios are configured in a variety of sizes—small, medium and large. The research confirmed that small teams don't work well in large rooms: There's too much distance between people and walls. This is an issue because the vertical plane is important for communicating and displaying information. Information persistence—analogue and digital—facilitates understanding and creates all-important team memory.

As team members carry more of their information on small, mobile devices, the vertical planes needed to become zones that host technology to support large-scale display so teams can gather around the content, understand it together and build on it. When teams are working this close to these vertical planes, acoustical privacy becomes critical. And as projects are completed and new teams form, it was important that the vertical planes could be easily reconfigured for different size spaces.

The innovation center includes 13 Project Studios of varying sizes. Each Project Studio is a smart space which seamlessly integrates architecture, furniture and technology to support both physical and remote participants. The vertical plane hosts technology tools to support large scale display so all teams members can easily see and access content.

All of the spaces offer a palette of posture—standing, lounging, perching and walking. This is particularly important during very long telepresence sessions, which can be energy-draining. Steelcase researchers observed "video fatigue" as a common malady among distributed teams and found spaces that encourage movement and a variety of postures could help ease the pain.

Because different teams work in different ways, each has the opportunity to select from a variety of furniture applications when they move into a studio. In this way, they can configure the space to their activities, preferences and tools, celebrating their processes and claiming the spaces as theirs for the duration. Because the studios are elastic and continuously evolving spaces, when the next team moves in, they can choose what's best for them.

The Back Alley provides a space where work moves from concept to reality

Designers like to think with their hands, so prototypes populate the entire innovation center. Prototypes give ideas physicality, so each project studio has ample space to stage, debate and store pieces, parts and even whole models. Teams can literally put things together and pull them apart to move ideas forward.

“We’ve seen project spaces that are so pristine that they discourage the ad hoc nature of creativity,” says Kammer. “Innovation through creative collaboration, if done authentically, is a visually and even socially messy process.”

## **AN ITERATIVE PROCESS**

The innovation center, like all Steelcase spaces, is a working prototype, in which the organization implements its latest ideas, learns what works and what doesn't, and modifies the space accordingly. It's an iterative process that is at the heart of design thinking, and the very act of innovation itself. This space is designed to iterate and allow learning, which is the essential ingredient for innovation. Over the coming years, as workers live and work in this new space, as new technologies emerge and are adopted, the innovation center's agile design will also adapt.

**“As workers live and work in this new space, as new technologies emerge, the innovation center's agile design will also adapt.”**

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**CHERIE JOHNSON** | Director of Design

A principle that will remain constant throughout any future evolutions is that innovation is dependent on human interactions. The physical environment has the power to augment those interactions that are essential for innovation, and will be increasingly global as distance gradually evaporates. Places will serve as the stage that brings together an organization's strategy, brand and culture and makes them tangible and actionable for employees. Intentionally designed places can amplify the performance of individuals, teams and the entire enterprise.

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