

New Offices Restore Ancient Principles



At Steelcase, we've embraced the idea of a resilient workplace as a response to the changing way people are now working. A resilient workplace is made up of an ecosystem of spaces giving choice and control over how and where people work to the employee. Based on the task at hand, workers can decide if a private, social or collaborative space is the best environment. As I became more familiar with this idea, it occurred to me that the underlying concept of choice and adaptation which ultimately improved someone's wellbeing was a familiar one. It harkened back to the Chinese yin-yang philosophy.

I found it reassuring that the underlying concepts involved with the resilient workplace, an ecosystem of spaces leading to employee wellbeing, are supported by this ancient principle. Yin-yang is based on the idea that all things exist as inseparable and contradictory opposites. To achieve harmony, a balance between both sides must be reached. You have likely heard of Feng Shui which is the Chinese system of harmonizing the yin and the yang within the built-in environment. The Chinese apply yin-yang to all aspects of life and the many hours spent at work are no different.

When I was asked to help translate for the CEO of Nanjin Sample Technology Company, based in central China, during a tour of Steelcase's business center in Michigan, I realized yin-yang could help me explain the resilient workplace. When an office is designed for resiliency, it supports employees in a variety of workstyles. The space can become a tool to improve employee engagement by giving choice and control to employees about where and how to do their best work.

When I toured with Mr. Sha Min, CEO of Nanjin Sample Technology, I knew his company name "Sample" was a direct translation to mean "three treasures." The conversation went from there.

"What are the three treasures your company values?" I asked.

"Talents, harmony and virtue among employees and customers," he responded.

"You would be happy to see how you can offer an array of space choices that employees can move in and out of harmoniously to develop their talents and cultivate their virtues, in particular trust building," I replied.

"Why trust building?" he asked.

"Well, it is the foundation for innovation," I said.

I knew that was true. By offering your employees a variety of places to work and letting them choose where to do their best work, you are also relaying a sense of trust that they will make good decisions about the best way to get their work done. Therefore, they'll be willing to take the risks needed for innovation.

The array of spaces that make up the resilient workplace includes rooms or enclaves to support focus and rejuvenation, small team spaces, large collaborative group rooms and social areas such as cafes. By relating the variety of spaces to the yin-yang principle, Mr. Min was easily able to start identifying the space patterns during his tour and see how he could model his workplace after the one half a world away here in Michigan.

To further understand the yin-yang philosophy, I think it's important to explain its foundation in nature.

The Chinese character for Yin represents the "shady side of the hill" and Yang represents the "sunny side of the hill." The pair was used to describe the effect of sunlight and shadow falling simultaneously on the hill. For thousands of years, the ancient Chinese have observed nature as an ecosystem discovering all things have their opposite counterparts, and the continuous movement and change between the two are the way to achieve balance and harmony. This is when people achieve wellbeing. At Steelcase, we strive to support employee wellbeing in the workplace.

Yin and yang are opposites, yet complementary. One cannot exist without the other. They balance and support one another just like different kinds of spaces in the work environment. Here's a few examples:

| Nature | | Characteristics | |
|--------|-------|-----------------|-------------|
| Yang | Yin | Yang | Yin |
| Day | Night | Public | Private |
| Fire | Water | Hard | Soft |
| Sunny | Shady | Socialize | Contemplate |

In nature, day and night, fire and water as well as sunny and shady balance each other. In the workplace, public and private spaces, hard and soft materials and social and contemplative environments create that balance. By giving people choice and control over their work environment throughout the day, they can create a feeling of balance for themselves and improve their overall wellbeing.

Many of us work inside, in an artificial, controlled environment that prevents us from feeling the rhythm of life inherent in nature. The concept of an ecosystem, or variety, of spaces helps us refresh our mind and engage as an active participant in our workplace community.

For more information

For more information on design strategies for the creation of thoughtfully-curated destinations that blend design, materiality and performance, read the latest issue of [360 Magazine](#).

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