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OBCAI

The Office Wire

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Norman Fox's Portfolio: Over 100 Centers Designed for Efficiency, Profitability and Aesthetics

Can you give us a brief background of your company? What does AoPlan stand for or mean?

AoPlan stands for Alternative Officing Planning. It is the only comprehensive planning service exclusively dedicated to the office business center industry. The brand began in 2003 but had its roots in an earlier service called Executive Suite Planners.

How did you get into the OBC industry?

In 1988, an associate brought us an opportunity to design an executive suite for Arbor Office Suites in Conshohocken PA. It was successful and led to several others with the same company.

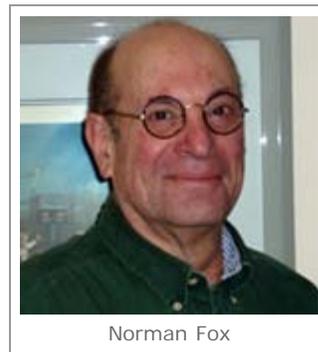
How many centers have you been involved with in terms of designing their space.

Over 100.

When did you design your first center – and what has changed in regard to the design of centers since you started?

We designed our first center in 1988. Virtual officing did not exist in any form although we began experimenting with prototype plans in the early 90's. The biggest difference is how people relate to their workplace. This has led to team rooms, seminar spaces, dedicated suites, super suites, open workstations, several new permutations of the original business center model, and an emphasis on sustainable design. The result is a reorganization of the thought processes related to center operational flow and working environments.

What is a center owner's greatest challenge in designing and building a center?



Norman Fox

There are four major "great challenges" for successful center development. The first is finding the best location and building that will efficiently support a business center. The second is establishing a realistic cost and expected economic benefit standard to guide you through development. The third item is designing a plan for maximum space and operational efficiency that supports your cost and profit projections. The fourth is creating an aesthetic environment that invites, pleases and supports end user needs over a long period of time.

What is the most important aspect of the center planner or designer's relationship with the building owner?

This can be answered on two levels. In the case of the small building owner, establishing a center in his or her facility, the relationship is similar to a client developing a center in a multi-tenant building except for some nuances that relate to us designing the building. In the case of an owner of a larger multi-tenant building, the relationship is more remote. Our interaction is usually at the level of the building manager. In this case, the important aspects are understanding the ownership/management roles in the project and established rules of the building.

What about the relationship of the planner/designer with the center owner. What are the key factors to ensure a successful relationship?

Key factors are establishing a basis of mutual respect, a positive exchange open to new ideas, an understanding of the client's goals and for his or her company and the project at hand and maintaining positive communication at all times. Some of my most successful projects have provided me with great lessons that I am able to take forward to future clients.

What are you most proud of in terms of design aesthetically? How about in terms of ensuring profit for the center?

Our approach to center development is to view the center as a business. The goal in the end is to develop an efficient space that supports the client's program and market and is capable of providing an expected and realistic return on investment. Aesthetics, of course, figures into the mix as an important ingredient. We are proud of our ability to blend these elements when developing successful centers.

What is the ideal ratio of leasable to non-leasable space?

For conventional center plans in useable space terms: 65 to 70% leasable, 18 to 20% common space, and 12 to 15% circulation. These ratios will vary with sizes of spaces and types of centers being developed.

What makes a center's layout efficient?

Effective space utilization. Space is generally the most expensive cost and return factor in center operation - its misuse can cause the greatest impact on eventual success. Two factors to consider are re-let space availability and positioning of spaces for operational efficiency.

How do you know if your design has been successful? What measure does a designer do to grade him or herself?

If the final product meets or exceeds a client's expectations by showing well, selling well, and operating efficiently, and producing expected profits.

Can a center owner design his or her own center or must they hire an outsider to work with the construction team?

An experienced owner can design their own center within the realm of their experience. A qualified consultant team will expand a center owner's knowledge and open up new opportunities that will result in efficient use of development funds, better profits and a higher probability of success.

What is the cost to hire an outside center planner and how is it worth it in terms of profitability as opposed to acquiring an existing center?

A center planner is capable of judging the condition and operational viability of the acquisition, and can advise the buyer on its value and probable rehabilitation costs. The additional cost of hiring a center planner is negligible when compared to the risk and rewards that professionals will bring to the project. A more direct answer is that cost depends on the type of project, its size, and scope.

What are some of the issues involved in construction costs? What are the factors that centers must weigh in terms of construction?

To name a few - finish levels, unions, availability of materials, schedules, additional work orders and costs, communication among participants - contractor, engineers, architects, project managers, coordination of outside vendors - cabling contractors, and the list goes on.

What are some of the newest ideas in center design?

"Community" and less formality in space design are becoming more important. The goal is to take the office out of the home and coffee house and bring it into the center as seamlessly as possible. The result is more open spaces that flow into one another.

What was one trend in center design/construction that has simply not worked and now is gone by the wayside?

I really can't name one. Many trends tend to be regional and not workable or unworkable in all areas. This is the result of local lifestyles affecting center design.

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