

MEDIA COVERAGE

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ELEMENTS

Corporate coffee bars

As cafes in the workplace become more popular, **Ian Boughton** finds their design should be left to the real experts – not architects but baristas

"Architects must stay away from the coffee bar." This is not a play to keep designers off their desks – it is the catering trade's belief that while the corporate in-house coffee bar grows in popularity, workplace designers shouldn't be involved in their layout.

The arrival of the high-street coffee bar into the office building is still a growing trend. Workplace design expert Jeremy Myerson saw it start ten years ago, telling the story of the Swedish corporate chief who famously said, "I don't care if my staff are sitting in my cafe, if that's where they have their ideas!"

In Britain, a less positive driver for the corporate cafe has been avoiding the staff going out to the high street coffee bar three or four times a day. Cafes are sometimes used strategically – at AstraZeneca's UK headquarters, Claremont Group Interiors sited the bar in the central atrium, knowing the client was bringing together two workforces who had to be encouraged to interact. However, adequate space is a rare luxury. Caterers mean that they never get enough space in a corporate building.

"It is not a design matter alone," says Nick Parker of catering company Bite, who argues that the unusual business model demands that the coffee trade be involved before the designer. "If you believe the industry yardstick of an average of 4.5 cups of coffee drunk per office worker per day, then for an office of 500 people, the annual value is anything up to \$265,000. That's why we ask clients to consider a 'coffee strategy' for their whole building – a mix of vended coffee (possibly free), hospitality coffee and coffee bar, with the relative service styles thought through for maximum take-up – not just 'design a coffee bar' but 'plan a coffee strategy'."



Above: The coffee lounge at AstraZeneca's UK HQ is placed in the central atrium, bringing a diverse workforce together.

Below: The cafe area at Cambridge Water's office was created by wrapping a glass conservatory around the building.



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In practice, Dave Booth of Nexus Retail Interiors reports having been expected to create a working cafe in a disused storage cupboard at the end of the longest dead-end corridor in a building. Chris Piper, sales director of contract caterer Arizian, voices the general industry view that "the biggest problem is being hit with a pre-ordained space, with very little rhyme or reason to it. That's why we have been given one area suitable for 170 in a building where we are supposed to cater for 2,500, and another area that can hold 300 in a building which employs only 600!"

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"In any situation where an architect has designed the catering environment, you find it's planned for aesthetics and not for practical workflow. This workflow is everything," says Angus McKenzie, sales director of the Metropolitan Coffee Company. "It is easy to have a 'trophy' coffee bar which doesn't work and becomes a grudging cost rather than a benefit to the client – the UK is littered with them!" And so the general catering trade belief is that in-house cafes should be designed by coffee people – not by architects. "The reason," remarks Paul Thacker, head of Turnkey Design, "is because we've seen many more mistakes in cafe design than you have!"

The practicalities can be unusual. Behind the counter, the creation of cappuccino at high speed depends on the precise placing of some obscure pieces of kit, understood only by skilled coffee-makers or baristas. An often overlooked element is waste disposal – the role of the 'knock-out box' and the need to discard seven grams of spent coffee grounds for every cup is only understood by baristas!

This page: The Metropolitan Coffee Company's design of the cafe at the HQ of Commerzbank is part of the growing trend of high-street brands taking over the corporate coffee house

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Out front, natural customer flow is the opposite of many catering design situations, explains Paul Meikle-Janney, MD of Coffee Community, barista and award-winning cafe designer. "Time after time we see the most beautiful coffee bars fail because of this. If people are waiting for their drink before they pay for it, you will get a bottleneck and unhappy customers. The ideal espresso system is a linear system, which Starbucks got absolutely right - order, pay and move to your drink, which is served at the end of the counter."

It may also be a mistake to allow the client to help. Tim Ripley, a consultant at the contract caterer Sodexo, is among those who warn that alarm bells sound whenever a client says they will save money by furnishing the customer seating area themselves. "Too often you'll see them set up a workplace coffee bar in tables of four, with no twos, and no groups. It's difficult to put this right when we're stuck behind the counter!"

We put this to one office design consultancy who replied: "We don't understand this", thus proving Ripley's point: the modern cafe is "the third place" - the meeting of workspace and relaxing space - and needs very creative understanding.

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Arguments rage over how the "third place" is achieved. One school of thought holds that circular tables are out because they cannot be pulled together for meetings. Another argues that large circular tables allow for six to meet together in equality. One opinion says that every cafe table must now have a power socket and internet connection while others believe that the internet-cafe style is an abomination. "If you allow for between five to eight per cent of a building's population to sit at once, that's a good start," says Angus McKenzie of Metropolitan Coffee Company. "Then assume that every customer will have either an A4 notepad or a computer, which dictates both your table space and height."

In recent years, there was a massive coffee-bar trend towards sofas. It's the belief in the coffee-trade that this is not practical in the corporate building - it was the deliberate illusion that you could unwind the afternoon away on that sofa, when the real aim was to turn customers round fast. However, the sofa has highlighted the other illusion, by which most designers turn straight to steel and wipe-down materials for cafes. "Those who take the risk of fabric benefit from the 'homely' feel - it can change the entire mood of a cafe," says Paul Meikle-Janney. "Starbucks were a leader in the 'third place' because they dared to use fabric, and they



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"Starbucks also play with ceiling heights and flooring very well. The average Starbucks has the ceiling low over the bar to make it cosy and put a carpeted area slightly up some steps. Therefore the ceiling is lower, which becomes the "snug" for meetings."

So should the entire design be handed over to a high-street coffee brand? Only if you want them to take the risk, say cynics. Some caterers claim that a branded coffee site performs 50 per cent higher than an unbranded site, but Artizan warns that some brands give very little in return for the loyalty and royalty payment. And yet the Caffè Nero chain predicts that within five years, nine corporate coffee bars in ten will display one of the top three high-street brands.

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There are design innovations that the cafe trade saw before anyone else. Lloyd Keiner of Tabletalk Media has created the business of putting advertisers' messages on tabletops - these are in coffee shops, 85 universities and moving into corporate cafes as a way of getting internal company messages across to a workforce, at a time when employees are in a relaxed state of mind and likely to stay for 15 minutes.

Meikie-Janney at Coffee Community has tested another way: "It's a poster tall in front of a bar with a layer of glass floated an inch or so above the counter. Magazines, papers and corporate messages are slotted under the glass - you read while standing your mug on the glass."

And the corporate cafe has cropped up to use the most unlikely spaces creatively. Claremont, working with architects Barber Casanovas Ruffles, extended the old Cambridge Water building by wrapping a glass conservatory around the outside - it became a successful long and narrow cafe space. Not an isolated example but an illustration of a new trend in positioning corporate cafe areas, says Chris Piper at Artizan. "A deliberate trend is for client-facing companies to use their coffee-house as an area to do business in, right at the front of their atrium, before reception. The major advantage of this is that you do not now have to register all your visitors through security. The second advantage is that your visitor usually buys their coffee themselves, while they're waiting for you!"

This page: Tabletalk Media pioneered advertising messages on table tops

