

UGH, COLLABORATION

We asked a group of designers to sketch spaces for collaboration. Here's what we got.

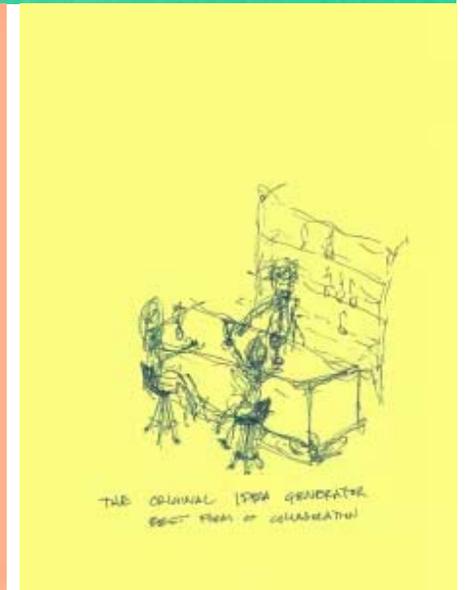
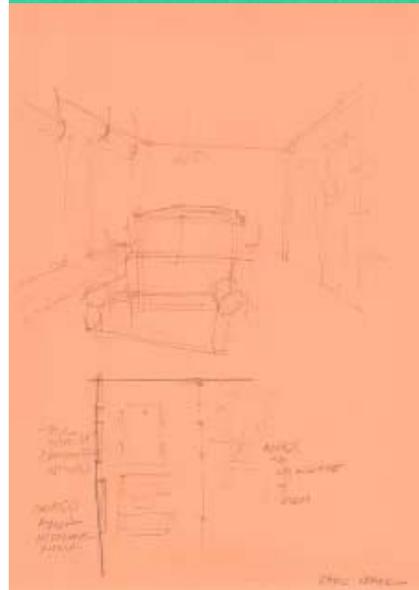
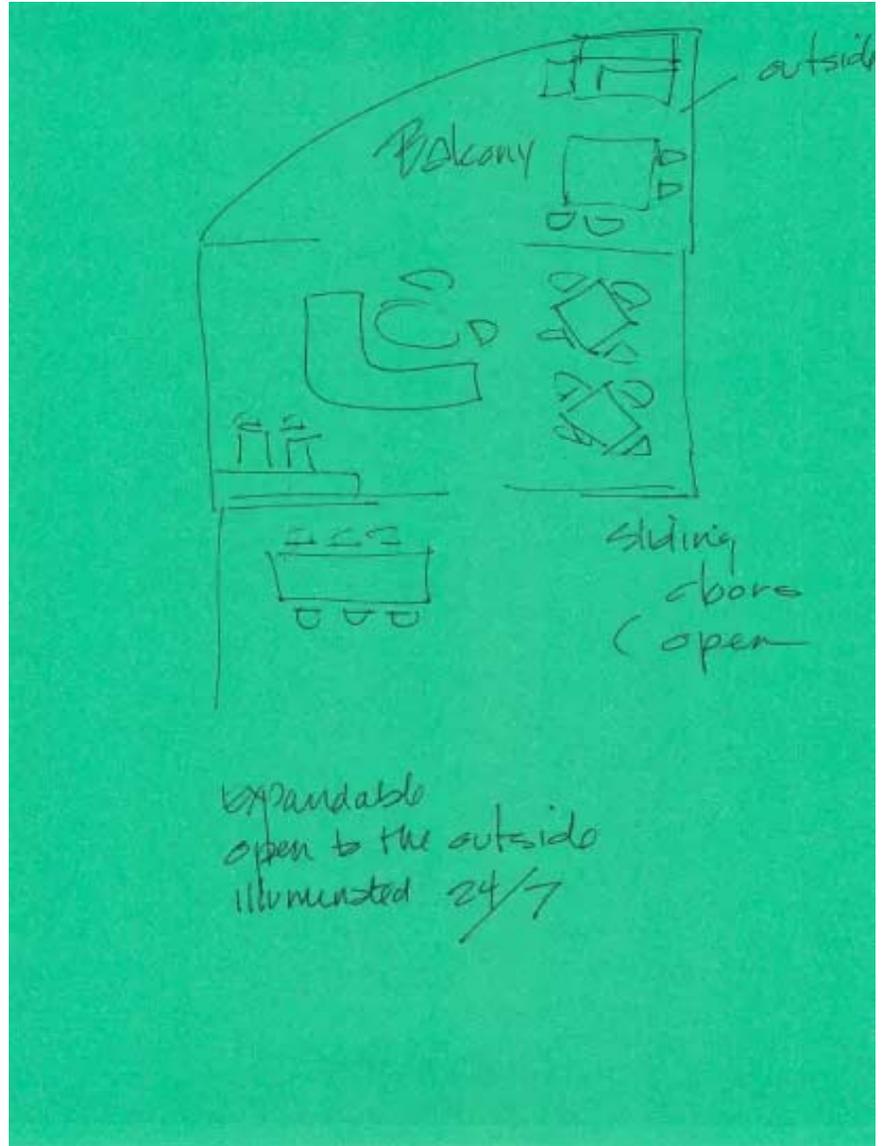
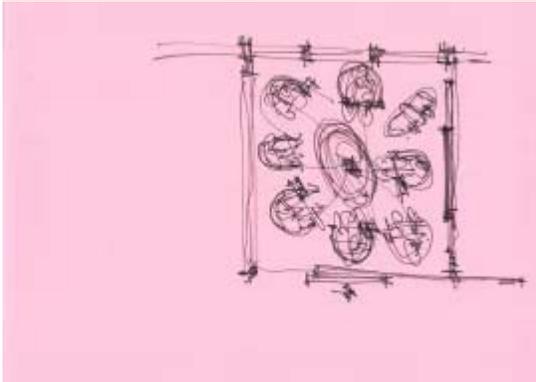
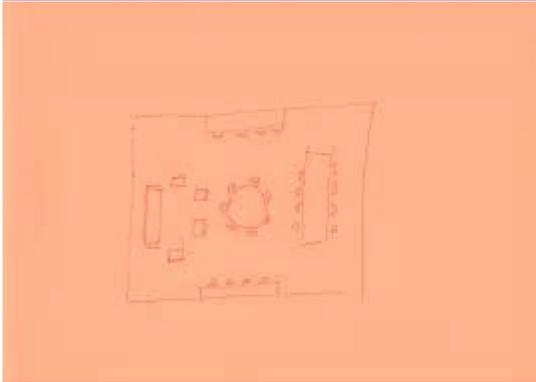
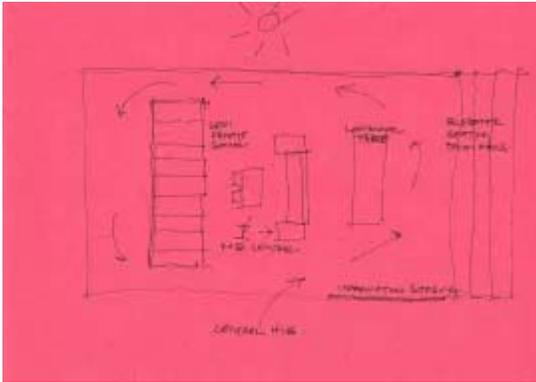


One of several quick sketches—each takes a different view of collaborative space.

Last week, I sat through another presentation about collaboration and how important it is in new workplaces. The discussion that ensued is one we've all heard before: the modern office is all about collaboration. But aren't you sick of hearing that word? When people say "collaboration", what do they really mean?

To find out, I asked a group of designers from One Global Design to sketch out their idea of a collaborative space. They had less than five minutes to sketch their design on a letter-sized piece of paper. I didn't give them any specifics. I simply asked for a collaborative space and I received everything from diagrams and plans to perspectives and axonometric diagrams.

Below, you can begin to see the variety of the responses. Lots of great ideas, but no clear or consistent pattern.

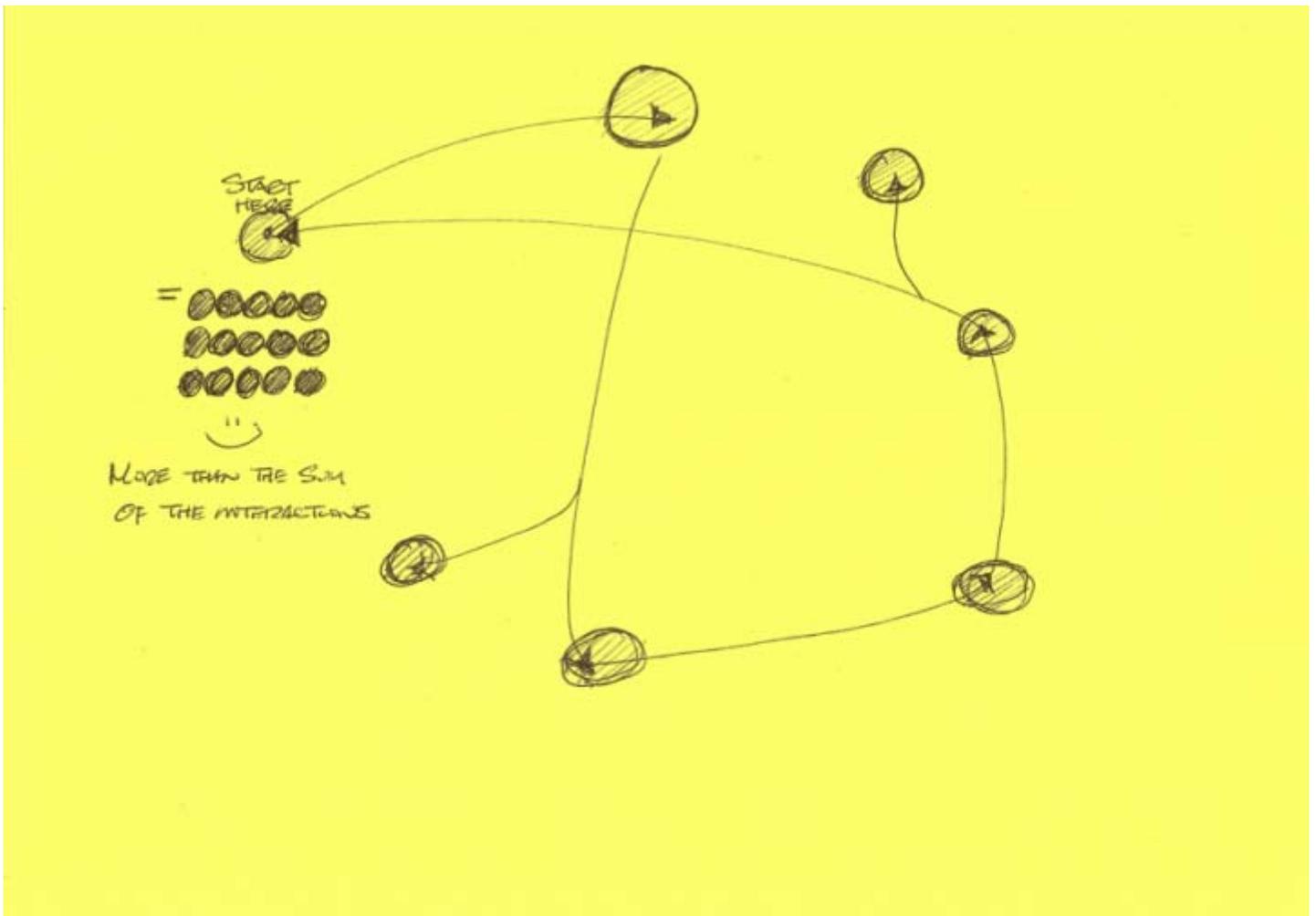


Why designing for “collaboration” is so challenging

When it comes to the physical environment, the challenge for architects and designers is to parse out exactly what the client needs when they say they need a “collaborative space”. We can’t design a space properly if we don’t know the specific details and precisely how it will be used. We need to understand exactly the type of collaboration that will take place and it is important to understand the tools that will be used.

If you get group of workplace designers together and ask them to design a collaborative space, chances are you will either get nothing, or you will get as many as 40 or 50 options, as in our experiment. How do you determine which option is right for your client?

Part of the challenge is that the workplace has changed so dramatically and so quickly that that we simply do not have the vocabulary to accurately describe the types of space that are necessary to support all of the different types of collaboration that we are designing space for today.



“More than the sum of the interactions.” :) ?



Team. Work. Team. Work. Team. Work. Teamwork!

A new lexicon

We use words like touchdown space, café, huddle room, or benching to try to describe the function of the space. Some give us a clue or two, but there are many others for which we have no adequate descriptors. Many of these spaces integrate technology and are now integrating specific apps like Google Hangout and Microsoft Link.

There are a large variety of spaces when you begin to consider the different combinations. Just from the sketches and the conversations that they started, we encountered the following conditions to consider:

Degree of openness

Is the space completely open and in a public space, or it is a private completely enclosed space? Or is there some partial enclosure?

Location

Is the space located in the primary circulation or is it located in a more remote and quiet part of the workspace.

Type of technology

Is the room a simple meeting room or does it have conference calling, projectors, flat screens, microphones, speakers, black out curtains, etc.?

Flexible furniture

Is the room able to be used for a variety of different types of meetings, presentations, training, speeches, or discussions where the furniture can be rearranged for multiple events?

Vertical surfaces

Should walls be used for white boards, pin ups, projections, graphics charts, or maps?

Size

Is the space meant for an intimate conversation or for a large group presentation or something in between, or does it need to expand and contract?

Food service

Will food be served, prepared, or eaten in the space? What type of service will be required?

Privacy and security

Today security can mean a lot of different things to different people. It could be a password or a retina scan, or it could be acoustic or visual privacy.

Internal or external

Will those collaborating be from within the organization or will there be external guests that might need a different type of support? Will the space need to be located to limit movement of guests?

All of the above—the sketches and the words—are examples of the issues that are driving collaborative space. These are just handful of the variations, but you can begin to see the challenges that we experience as the work, the technology, and the way that we collaborate changes. We may not have a clear or consistent vocabulary, but it's not an insurmountable challenge as long as designers have an awareness of the variety of the ways that people and organizations need to interact. And the more we can tailor spaces to the increasing variety of ways we interact, the less likely we'll be to react with an "ugh" when the client says they're looking for space to support collaboration.