In the movie *Office Space* (Riedel & Judge, 1999), the main character reclaims his freedom by removing one of the walls of his cubicle that obstructed his view of the world. In *What Americans Build and Why: Psychological Perspectives*, Ann Sloan Devlin brings the metaphor of thinking outside the box alive by describing first the box, then the contents of the box. Devlin is an environmental psychologist who studies ergonomics and design. In addition to her competence with regard to the basic issues of design, she demonstrates competence for understanding the human behavioral context to the design issue—a true human factors book.

A cube has six sides. A typical office cubicle has five sides: three enclosed sides, one partial side (door), a floor, and an open top. As I write this, my own faculty cubicle has a large side with a half wall, presumably to increase worker morale and efficiency by allowing a view of the natural world as the Herman Miller company envisioned (n.d.), though mine
adjoins a brick wall affording me a view of yet another wall. Devlin masterfully builds a metaphorical office cubicle. In five informative sections, she traces the history of building and design in the United States for housing, health care, schools, work, and retail.

Building Devlin’s Cubicle

If the devil is in the details, this six-sided book (proportionately not quite a cube) is sure to produce some mischievous thought. *What Americans Build and Why* is a fascinating collection of answers to the questions “How did that get there?” and “Why is it that way?” Using a comfortable style of combining anecdotes and research, Devlin thoroughly provides a history of creativity in American building in five very important domains. She builds her own metaphorical “cubicle” one wall at a time.

For the first domain, Devlin discusses the history of housing in America. The development of a market for McMansions, large houses built in architecturally incongruent areas, is contrasted with the New Urbanist movement seeking to create a connected, walkable community of high density.

This section develops the history of the roadway infrastructure in setting the stage for the creation of suburbs. Migration from the cities to suburbs was driven by space; however, New Urbanism stresses a migration back to the urban setting with better efficiency of space and more design to support the biophilic (Wilson, 1984) tendencies of the urban human animal. However, McMansions are seen by many as extraordinary totems of American affluence. Of course, their popularity flies in the face of their New Urbanist critics.

Though it appears that Devlin sympathizes with the New Urbanists, she does an excellent job of writing about research, presents both sides of the debate, and presents her own views. This book is well written for an audience having any fundamental belief regarding building, creativity, or commerce.

For the second domain, Devlin discusses the history of building health care facilities in America. Among the debates in this section are the issues of single occupancy versus multiple occupancy rooms, as well as bundled versus unbundled health care services.

Social status is linked to the preference for single or multiple occupancy rooms, with higher social status people tending to prefer single occupancy rooms and lower social status people tending to prefer multiple occupancy rooms. Obviously contagious diseases are better treated in single occupancy rooms if possible, but this demonstrates that one size does not fit all with regard to design.

In fact, the initial increased costs of creating single occupancy rooms are offset by the fact that patients in single occupancy rooms are transferred at lower rates, the rooms are filled at higher rates, patients have shorter stays, and fewer medication errors are made.
Ultimately, Devlin states that the future of health care building design will be based on whether building designs have positive health outcomes.

The third domain Devlin discusses is the building of educational facilities. This debate centers on the comparison of large schools versus small schools. Devlin discusses Thomas Kuhn and Kurt Lewin in building the argument for the need to examine trait psychology and ecological psychology. However, the focus is on comparing a large school containing many state-of-the-art facilities and diverse (but specialized) opportunities with a small school with the opportunity for increased depth among a series of diverse, general opportunities.

For the fourth domain, Devlin discusses the history of the cubicle and the open plan, as well as health, stress, and implications of working remotely using technology. This is where Devlin’s metaphorical cubicle comes together—with a discussion of the office cubicle.

Designed by Robert Propst and introduced by Herman Miller in 1968, the cubicle is the staple of the Action Office furniture system. Action Office was designed to be a low-cost, flexible arrangement of modular office components. Devlin points out that the window is viewed as a reflection of status; more windows in an office translate to a higher status of the occupant. This is applicable to cubicles as well, as anecdotally evidenced by the worker in the movie Office Space removing his cubicle wall to view the window upon getting his promotion.

Research indicates that reductions in visual and acoustical privacy are the top production blockers in the open plan, closely tied to worker dissatisfaction. Devlin suggests that production benefits of the office cubicle come with simple repetitive jobs—complex jobs requiring analytical thinking are hindered by the open plan. Thus, the open plan plays on simple principles of social facilitation (Mather, 2008).

Devlin also cites research that indicates that open plans with cubicles do not increase communication (thus refuting a major selling point of the open plan) and that worker motivation and satisfaction decrease when workers move from a traditional office (four floor-to-ceiling walls and a door that closes) to office cubicles. Perhaps this is due to the one disturbance or distraction that occurs every two minutes in the American office, across all types of offices (Sanders & McCormick, 1993).

For the fifth and final domain, Devlin discusses the history of shopping malls and shopping centers. The focus of this section is the evolution of the shopping mall into something that may be unrecognizable in future years and the impact of large stores such as Wal-Mart on the shopping experience. Devlin also discusses the impact of online shopping on the dynamic context of building retail facilities.
Conclusions

In building the metaphorical cubicle, Devlin has drawn many details from an array of sources and integrated them into a thought-provoking book. The essence of this book is appropriately captured in the title What Americans Build and Why. This book is well researched, providing social scientific research from many different scholarly outlets, including empirical research, expert opinions, and mainstream media articles. Indeed, Devlin is quick to point the reader to the limitations of social scientific research that does not derive from experimental designs with random assignment. Still, her ideas are meticulously researched, and her commentary is well founded and based on sound principles of both human factors psychology and social psychology.

Devlin provides a thorough history of the debates relevant to design in America, and any reader will view the constructed world much differently after reading What Americans Build and Why. This book will be of interest to any scholar, academic or other, with an inquisitive mind and a fascination for learning how things come to be the things they are in front of us.

References


