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”Innovative Workplaces, Historic Spaces: Modernizing the House Office Buildings”

United States House of Representatives

Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress

March 17, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and members of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

My name is Katie Irwin and I am a licensed architect and interior designer, specializing in both historic preservation and interior architecture. I am also a member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). AIA applauds this bipartisan Select Committee for including physical office space within its review of Congress's existing practices and procedures. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this important discussion today.

As an architect, I believe deeply in the power of design to transform lives and to support the essential functions of our society. Design best practices can maximize the available office space and better equip Members of Congress and their staffs to meet the demanding requirements of their positions. Modernizing Congressional offices also has staff recruitment and retention value, as highly functional and attractive workplaces can help encourage more individuals to consider a career in public service.

I respectfully offer these recommendations for your consideration. Please note that this should not be mistaken as a substitute for design consultation with an architect or design professional. When working with our clients, my firm and other architects undergo extensive data gathering to ascertain a client's priorities and work within their budgets. These recommendations today are meant as a starting point to help this Committee as you assess opportunities for improvements to the U.S. Capitol and its campus. I also wish to acknowledge that additional consultation with individual Member offices and the Architect of the Capitol would be required to implement these changes.

Historic Buildings, Modern Functionality

In my practice, I have worked with multiple government clients in historic buildings. I fully appreciate the concern that Congressional office space retain the grandeur we associate with the seat of American democracy. It is critical to maintain the institution's character-defining features, spaces, and finishes, such as the interior marble staircases and long corridors. This is completely feasible while still allowing for necessary modernizations to meet the needs of the 21st century office building.

When working with historic buildings, we work with our clients to identify "priority zones," where the historic character and public-facing aspects of the building are an elevated concern. For Congress, this could include the building entrances, corridors, hearing rooms, and public spaces, which the public associates with gravity and grandeur. Those areas are distinct from other zones within the building that are of lesser priority for historic preservation, perhaps because they are less public-facing with fewer historic features or because they have already been modified numerous times, such as staff-only Committee rooms.

Congressional office suites could present a mix of both zones. The Member of Congress's office may require solemn design and furnishing, but congressional staff working spaces have typically not been designed that way. Currently, many staff working spaces are reflective of the cubicle-space office design characteristic of the late 20th Century. I would suggest that it is time to update the staff

working space again to better reflect workplace design trends in 2022 and multiple modes of working.

Modern furnishing can support this goal. In my practice, we've worked with government clients to include historic writing desks and bookcases and other traditional pieces including those custom built for the historic building alongside sit-to-stand desks, credenzas, and other technology-incorporated furniture. There are even replica historic desks that offer a sit-to-stand function. When approached thoughtfully, this can be done in a beautiful and tasteful balance of form, function, and ergonomics. In fact, some more modern desks can better integrate technology so that wiring is less noticeable, in addition to being more user-friendly.

Noise and Daylight

Congress should also consider methods to reduce noise contamination and increase access to daylight. These are common concerns among American office workers across industries, and Congress should not underestimate the impact these issues have on day-to-day morale and productivity.

Employees work better and are less distracted in offices that incorporate wellness policy and design. Lighting, acoustics, air quality, temperature, humidity, and physical health all have impacts on cognitive function and when designed appropriately, can lead to more efficient and happier employees. According to a 2017 report from CBRE Group, employee performance can improve between 10-40% in healthy offices.

Health and wellness focused office environments enhance culture, brand, and organizational responsibility. They differentiate a workplace from those of competitors and demonstrate an investment in human capital. Employees prefer and work best in spaces with natural light, good air quality and access to greenery and views of nature and amenities. They also say they are happier and less likely to quit.

Currently, many Congressional office suites use six-foot tall cubicle partitions within staff working spaces, which in some cases block the daylight from nearby windows, but do not block sound. Glass partitions allow for daylight to carry through more of the office, increase transparency, and can help to muffle sound. Alternatively, using lower cubicle partitions would increase daylight transfer, while still demarcating individual work stations. Congress could also upgrade the interior lighting systems, moving away from some of the harsher light palettes of halogen lights to warmer lighting which can be provided by energy efficient LEDs. Many employers looking to attract talent in a competitive market are incorporating circadian lighting, which replicates the lighting adjustments of a normal 24-hour cycle. Sunshades and blackout shades can be automated to work with available daylight.

Sound attenuation should also be a priority. Congress is an exciting place to work, but that bustle of activity comes with challenges. As you know, most Congressional suites use the staff-designated area to include a small kitchen, refrigerator, six desks, copy/printer zones, a coffee maker, and televisions. They also include small meeting tables to meet with constituents or interest groups, all while other staff members may have other meetings happening simultaneously. Other meetings are held while walking along the historic corridors in order to have space and privacy. With the

increase in virtual meetings, where multiple staff members may be next to one another on different video calls, the sound quality is getting worse.

Sound masking is a method to emit a low-level frequency that muffles sound transfer within an office space, allowing coworkers to engage in separate phone conversations with less interference. Historic plaster walls and wood paneling are hard surfaces that bounce sound. Sound absorbent panels could also be considered within staff working spaces, which can be easily applied and removed. These can be applied to a number of surfaces such as ceiling hung or wall mounted. Utilizing the historic telephone booths, found underutilized spaces, and adding privacy booth/pods furniture would also assist with the acoustics.

Activity-Based Planning

The tactics mentioned above would improve current workplace functionality, but a comprehensive strategy should include activity-based planning. Activity-based planning is the design concept that different areas of the office suite and within the Capitol complex should serve different meeting functions, connected together by updated scheduling software.

This is a key workplace trend, as employers are endeavoring to persuade their employees to come in to work, in some cases after two years away. Employers need to offer something to their employees that they can't replicate (or improve upon) at their desks at home. There has been some speculation that, in the post-COVID era, the American workforce will continue to work fully-remote forever. I believe this underestimates the importance of physical interaction to a workplace culture and the ability to build strong professional networks. While some employers, including Congress, may consider allowing some more telework and flexibility, shared office space will continue to be an important aspect of most American industries and certainly in civic life. By designating specific spaces for collaborative meetings of various sizes with integrated technology and separate areas for heads-down work, your teams would be equipped to function at the highest level.

Within an individual office suite, this could include redesigning the layout to include smaller, sound-controlled booths, fully equipped to take video calls and answer constituent questions. There may be a second designated area for small group meetings and a third for quiet work. The Member of Congress office within the suite could include conference tables or other furnishing that can be repurposed for staff use when the Member is not in session, alleviating some of the scheduling pressure on the other available office spaces.

Some staff offices do have shared desks for part-time in-person work (hoteling) and hot desks. Depending on the workplace preferences of each individual office, this can be used to maximize available space. In this format, desks are not assigned to individual staff members, but can serve a particular work function. Some offices may prefer a more traditional assigned seating chart, but for offices who embrace this format, it can foster a collaborative, inclusive, and less-hierarchical structure.

Activity-based planning should extend to the campus, as more spaces within the Capitol Complex could be reimagined to serve more than one function. Congress could undergo a survey to determine if there are underutilized rooms which could be converted to foster bipartisan working spaces. I understand that encouraging bipartisan collaboration is a key priority for the Select

Committee. Depending on your preferences, you could designate bipartisan office space organized by committee, by state delegation, by class year, or by region to encourage collaboration among Congressional offices who have something in common.

Congressional hearing rooms are impressive when in use, but often sit empty. I would not recommend changing the structure of the dais where Members of Congress sit, as that ought to be considered a "priority zone" for preservation. However, the furnishing for the audience could be upgraded. By using a more modular design, the rows to seat an audience (as they are now), could be converted to facilitate meeting space when the room is not in use.

Wayfinding and Accessibility

Finally, to ensure a more inclusive environment for constituents, Congress should consider additional investments to update wayfinding and accessibility within the Capitol complex. A wayfinding expert could commission a full review of current signage, but as a starting point, you could consider including more information about the full suite of amenities included within the building on the signs on each floor. This could include cafeterias, caregiver restrooms, and other public spaces.

Touchscreens or other digital displays could rotate information about the day's hearings and events, located at the main entrances and outside committee rooms. Kiosks in communal areas within the buildings could provide more information to visitors, for example, an explanation of the lighting system to help demystify the voting process. Consider also renumbering the offices in Rayburn to fit a more predictable pattern and examining other potentially confusing signage (as you know, Rayburn, Longworth & Cannon all have different numbering systems which often confuse constituents).

Accessibility should be considered from the point of building entry through the door to the Member of Congress's office. In some cases, the current configurations within the office suite can make it difficult for individuals with physical or sensory disabilities to visit their Member of Congress or work for their Member of Congress. This can be addressed in multiple ways while maintaining the workstyle preference of the Member of Congress.

Increasing the number of caregiver restrooms would also be an important improvement. Congress should also survey the current existence, or lack thereof, of mother's rooms/ nursing rooms for employees who are breastfeeding. Throughout the pandemic, many women left the workforce to take care of their children due to a lack of day care. Even before COVID-19, a lack of workplace support, including physical, dedicated spaces to support new mothers, discouraged workforce participation for many women. Now with more women returning to work, access to mother's rooms would be an amenity worth providing to attract and retain talented staff.

Conclusion

It is important to note that many of these recommendations may necessitate a cultural shift and some may not work for every office. However, thoughtful, intentional space planning of Congressional offices is a worthwhile endeavor. Promoting effective, collaborative, and healthy workplaces on Capitol Hill supports good governance, which benefits all of us. We can be good

stewards of these historic spaces while sensitively integrating modern updates to facilitate the technology-fueled pace of work required to executive these positions today.

The WELL Building Standard rating system looks at 10 concepts for overall wellness: air, water, nourishment, light, movement, thermal comfort, sound, materials, mind, community, and innovation. Improvement across all 10 of these concerns in the workplace where people spend so much of their waking hours will improve productivity, communication, health, efficiency, and well-being.

As offices start implementing these modernizations and begin to reap the benefit in staff productivity, recruitment, and higher morale, I anticipate that the changes will be embraced. AIA would welcome the opportunity to continue to be a resource for you as you consider workplace adaptations to meet 21st century demands.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today on this important topic. I look forward to your questions.