The 1980s saw a boom in commercial office building development; of Tucson’s 260 office buildings, nearly half were built in the 80s.¹ These were designed to display the success of the organization and put the C-Suite in coveted corner offices. But in today’s knowledge-based economy, 1980s buildings aren’t attracting new tenants. They don’t offer 21st century technology and they don’t support a team-based, cognitively complex, and collaborative workplace. Perhaps this is why 18–20 percent of Tucson offices are underperforming.²

Dekker/Perich/Sabatini recognized the significant opportunity in repositioning this vast portfolio. Our architects and interior designers developed Tomorrow’s Workplace, a winning design for the 2014 NAIOP Build-Out/Interior Design Competition.

Tomorrow’s Workplace reimagines an urban 1980s office building to create a new workplace viable today and tomorrow. The solution conceptually converts a single use property into a mixed-use development with office, co-work space, retail, and residential uses and incorporates shared amenities including a community kitchen, rooftop patio and multi-story walking path. While a real project may not apply all of these strategies, any of them could be employed to make a more vital and sustainable project in an urban setting.

Tomorrow’s Workplace: Fundamental Design Concepts

Repurposing existing office inventory to address 21st century needs is more affordable than building ground-up, more sustainable, and addresses the underlying issue of longevity.

Often the value of these existing buildings is in their location. Most urban sites have WalkScores of 80 or higher and offer conveniences and amenities to building tenants, making these sites highly desirable. Many of these sites also offer the opportunity to densify by reducing parking and adding retail, housing or other amenities. This added development can help offset the cost to renovate and re-concept an existing office building.

In addition to optimizing the site, repurposing also saves raw construction materials by using the embodied energy of the existing structure. Embodied energy is the energy required to manufacture, maintain, and dispose of a given material. Using Tally, a life cycle analysis software program, we estimated the embodied energy of a prototypical,
A seven-story 1980s office building to be the equivalent of 117,417 gallons of gasoline. That’s enough fuel to send a semi-truck from New York to Los Angeles 423 times.

Digging a little deeper, the team partnered with Vibrancy—an energy consulting firm—to investigate further strategies to optimize the building. Vibrancy found 18% energy savings over the course of a year by simply transitioning single-use buildings to mixed-use. In the case of a typical 7-story office building, that equates to $63K savings per year.

Other strategies to optimize systems include passive chilled beam, bifacial and solar powered panels, onsite renewable energy and highly efficient mechanical and lighting systems. Tomorrow’s Workplace was evaluated with both a LEED scorecard (potentially achieving a Platinum rating) and the WELL Building Standard which considers how the building affects the health and wellbeing of its occupants (with a possible Gold rating).

But how long can we expect a more affordable, sustainable solution to last before becoming outdated once again? After all, as times change and new generations introduce new ideas and technology, unforeseeable demands are put on a building. This is why Tomorrow’s Workplace focuses on constants, or human factors.

Because 10,000 Baby Boomers reach retirement age each day and Millennials have rapidly become the largest demographic in the workforce, design cannot focus on a single generation or fading trends. Instead, to enhance the longevity of a building, Tomorrow’s Workplace proposes a flexible design that enables future technology integration and addresses human safety, wellbeing, personal connections, autonomy, and cross-generational learning.

Translating these intangible human factors into the design of Tomorrow’s Workplace requires spaces that build community, offer flexibility, and support work-life balance.

- **Collision Zones** are shared spaces—like break areas, conference rooms, multi-purpose rooms, and rooftop patio—where tenants meet accidentally. These collision zones encourage building occupants to interact, exchange ideas, and create a micro-community within the mixed-use environment.
- **The Workplace** offers both open office and private work options, flexible and moveable furniture, showers and lockers, and a mother’s room. The workspace is designed to easily integrate the newest technologies over time.
Wellness opportunities abound through universal access to daylight and views, onsite exercise venues, and an outdoor, multi-story walking path. Providing onsite retail to support daily needs, such as a pharmacy, child care, and small grocery, invites occupants to take care of their personal needs during the day rather than postponing these activities to after-work hours.

Bottom Line
This concept makes huge strides in sustainability while achieving real live/work/play opportunities that promote wellness and a balance of work and leisure time. By reusing existing office inventory to create the office of the future, we can greatly reduce costs and save a tremendous amount of resources. This type of mixed-use, urban micro-community benefits occupants, the environment, and ultimately improves the bottom line.


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