

AD OFFICIUM

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Like some of you, I've been retired for what seems like a long time. Having worked through the last third of the 20th century, I was determined not to make that mistake again in the first third of this one. So, on the very cusp of the Millennium, I retired from my last professional post.

I harbored two objectives for my retired years, one of which was to, however figuratively and furtively, again live the life of a 16 year old on summer vacation, but this time with a slightly larger allowance. My other goal was to do things I'd not had extra time or energy enough for in my working years, including reflection.

Thus, I've reflected that the last third of a century saw me almost constantly based in offices of one sort or another, unlike many of today's employed folk, who seem to work from anywhere, anytime. Thanks to laptops, I-pads and smart phones -- little devices that as we've heard, carry more computing power than it took to put a man on the moon -- their offices are now wherever they find themselves. They work from their own bed at home, on the road, at coffee shops or even on vacation. And, not everyone has had a real office. Many have long counted themselves lucky to be out there, free and unfettered from what some call, "these four walls." And speaking of getting out of the office, I recall a sports bar and grill in the western suburbs called "At The Office," so when asked where one could be found, the honest answer could be: I'll be "At The Office!"

But back in the last century, or "in the day," an actual office was always my base, and often not totally unlike the stylized fictional space in NBC-TV's popular series "The Office," of Dunder Mifflin fame. And yes, we did sometimes get out of those offices, to three-sakitini lunches and to frequent business meetings, and an occasional short vacation, criss-

crossing this country and many others. But, I always returned to that comfortable anchor, my personal office space in a building full of other people in offices, where more often than not I would spend more time than in my own home.

“Ad Officium” can be roughly translated from the Latin as meaning “At The Office.” That’s the meaning I was looking for when it occurred to me one day that I had spent all that time, up to the Millennium, compartmentalized, quite literally, at one office or another. “Ad officium” in the ancient Roman sense need not necessarily have been just a fixed place, with walls or barriers, but even then could be a mobile “bureau.” As a senior executive of Lego says, “work is no longer somewhere you go, but something you do.”

But to me, an office has indeed been a real room, often with actual walls and sometimes a door for privacy, though younger folks today know offices best as door-less and often wall-less “cubes” or cubicles. A cube is a 1964 open office furniture system hatched by the Herman Miller Company, defined as “creating an efficient space controlling privacy but at the same time encouraging creative interaction.”

Today, we might well ask, “Were we the last generation that needed offices?” The Internet is playing a critical role in making what we think of as the office irrelevant. I recently read an article about “bleisure,” being defined as a combination of work and leisure, and the blurring lines between home and business. Bleisure! One study showed that desks are now used slightly more than half the time in most organizations and the rest is spent in collaborative settings or what are called touch-down spaces. In perhaps the ultimate iteration, Popular Science magazine recently published a do-it-yourself article on how to make a “wearable office” out of a bass-drum carrier, featuring a computer station that let’s you move about and get exercise while working. But I think you’d prefer your ubiquitous Smartphone.

Throughout my career I was a professional writer and planner, working for consulting agencies and corporations in the field of public relations. Thus, the lion’s share of my work was done behind a desk, wielding the tools of that trade from pen to electronic wonders, usually with a crowded bookshelf with dictionary, thesaurus, style guides and other references close at hand.

In tonight's little office tour, I will share some of my own changing experiences at offices and redefined working spaces, as well as encounters with emerging business technology toward the end of the 20th century, in a time that was beginning a transition to the drastically different work life of today.

But how and why is such suspiciously mundane reflection, like this on one person's experience with office life, worth bothering? Perhaps none put it better than Samuel Johnson, the most literate man of his age. He was also the inspiration for the progenitor literary club, in 18th century London, and he sought to explain why the pedestrian things, perhaps like office life, are worth probing.

He wrote of it in his 1775 book, 'A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland.' He said: "The true state of every nation is the state of common life. These diminutive observations seem to take away something from the dignity of writing, and therefore are never communicated but with hesitation, and a little fear of abasement and contempt. But it must be remembered that life consists not of a series of illustrious actions, or elegant enjoyments; the greater part of our time passes in compliance with necessities, in the procurement of petty duties."

As a boy, my own sort-of-office was nothing more than a small wooden desk, with a drawer and a chair, overlooking the back yard from my bedroom at our home in Riverside. Though I'd had that desk since junior high, my first clear memory of sitting at it was as I was working on a paper for a class at the University of Chicago, when my mother walked into the bedroom, and told me, in a teary voice, that she had just heard a radio report that President Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. That little desk, and the stark memory from then on associated with it, followed me when I moved away to college, and later when I moved back to Chicago into my first small apartment in Lincoln Park.

After college, my first real "office," if I may loosely call it that, became a battered old oak desk behind a reception counter in the headquarters company of the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I was a newly assigned second lieutenant, just out of college and graduated from Officer's Candidate School. While many of my college friends were going on to graduate school or beginning careers and families, my path

to avoid the draft had been to volunteer for an accelerated program leading to an Army commission.

At the front of my new military desk proudly stood my first and only complete professional nameplate, this little one in fact, containing my name, rank and primary profession, which was armor. While I was trained to be a tank company commander, I found myself, as was not uncommon in our Army, serving in a very different role, as an administrative leader. With several score of cooks, drivers, clerks, mechanics and security personnel under my tiny command, I was running a little beaurocracy, in the old Roman sense of the word. At this odd War College post, within the military's highest bastion of learning, I worked mostly at that desk, sorting out duty schedules, emergency drills, escort duties, graduation parades and funeral honor guards. When promoted from behind that old desk, I became an operations officer, out and about organizing all sorts of then seemingly important things on the historic Pennsylvania campus, once the Indian School of Jim Thorp fame. I was kept constantly busy saluting, at a place top heavy with more colonels, generals and ambassadors than all other ranks put together.

Two years later, I moved into a more egalitarian office, on the opposite side of the world, in a combined corps press camp near the North Vietnamese border. Here my "clients" were the world's press, from legendary war reporters like Peter Arnett to CBS-TV camera teams to journalists for Agency France Presse. My office was called a hooch, an elevated wooden base with a tent fitted on top, no windows and a light bulb hanging over an old typewriter and a few desks. Outside were a murky bomb shelter and a charming Asian-style latrine. The "office" for those reporters was a much larger hooch, furnished courtesy of the Associated Press, which served as a sort of press club. The reporters had nicknamed it Holiday Inn North, and there they could watch TV, eat a steak, drink a scotch – or even write and file a story, in the aftermath of the North Vietnamese Tet offensive of 1968. What the Romans might have called a "mobile bureau" was my jeep, with enough room for a driver, myself, serving as press officer, and two reporters or a TV crew, on the road covering the action near the ancient Vietnamese capitol of Hue. It was the only office I've sat in where I've been shot at, and indeed, they missed.

My last military office was considerably more quiet, at Fort Sheridan, on Chicago's north shore, in the press office among a long row of handsome brick buildings dating to the early years of the 20th century, and since turned into elegant private homes. I sometimes served as a briefing officer for the mid-America Army Commander, a three-star general. I'd brief him on major events, such as anti-nuclear demonstrations at the old missile stations in Lincoln Park or the Kansas funeral for President Eisenhower, who had continued as a 5-star General of the Army until his death in 1969. Such briefings were held in our general's own bomb shelter, deep beneath his office within the handsome central water tower building, at one time the highest structure in the Chicago area.

Back in civilian life, I took my first job in private industry as a public affairs associate at the sprawling headquarters of the Allstate Insurance Company, along the toll way in Northbrook. If I'd known then what I know now, that one of my ancestors had been the first reported victim of an accident involving an auto in New York City, in 1896, I might have felt more at home in the insurance industry. But, the executive who hired me gave me a re-assuring boost when he promised that Allstate would not hold my military service against me. That was good news for a veteran in those times.

Our steel desks with manual typewriters were in a row along the north-facing windows of the complex's 12-story executive building. The chairman was officed on the top floor, and we were on the 2nd. He had a "clean desk" rule, meaning he would wander the building some evenings and leave cryptic notes for any who would thwart his iron rule.

As I was new to the corporate world, to me his arbitrary policy might as well have meant: "A clean desk is a sign of a cluttered desk drawer." But Sears Roebuck then owned Allstate, and our chairman was an inheritor of the Sears tradition. Sears pioneered the idea that managers needed to play an active role in directing the work of subordinates to increase the efficiency of the workplace. That meant large, open floor plans, with rows of desks that faced scrupulous supervisors. It was a little like what one New Yorker writer would later describe as "the deadened hamster-wheel ambience of office life."

I soon discovered that at Allstate, it often took 20 years to work one's way up to the title of manager, and become ensconced in an actual office with a window, instead of at a row of desks. The culture then at Allstate

was all about conformity, including a conservative dress standard of a solid dark suit, white shirt and fore-in-hand tie. When my own supervisor refused to shake my hand after I returned from a two-week Army reserve posting sporting a new mustache, I decided it might be time to move beyond the “Good Hands” of Allstate. My decision was clinched when I realized that, while Allstate was glad to have me as a public affairs spokesperson, in their infinite wisdom, they continued to decline insuring my car. I left Allstate after two long years, anxious to take on my first role as a corporate communications manager.

The first time I had an actual private office was at the mid-America headquarters of Toyota, the then rapidly growing small car company. I had turned up for my final interview for that job in my beloved little car, a Volkswagen Beetle. While interviewing with the vice president, a voice came over the PA system, asking the person with a Volkswagen to please remove their car from the Toyota parking lot. I became an instant student of the competitive spirit of the automotive industry. But my loose claim to fame as a creative PR manager at Toyota came when the vice president of information services asked me to help publicize his new pride and joy, a state-of-the-art IBM 360 computer system. I decided to photograph him at the control station of the big computer with his hands on a Toyota automobile steering wheel, which I had installed at the desk, as if he were “driving” the computer. He wound up on the cover of an auto trade magazine.

In my next career move, prompted by a fascination with the public relations agency business, I joined Burson Marsteller, a prominent global agency, downtown in the Loop, in a tall white office building at the intersection of State Street and Wacker Drive. As a new public relations account executive working on the massive national Sears Roebuck account, I was assigned a private office, with an actual window, a nice wooden desk with an IBM Selectric typewriter, guest chairs, and a door. This was all good news. On the other hand, the window faced a brick wall across the alley. My boss, in the office next door, on more than one occasion of snit-fits had actually thrown his typewriter against his wall. On the other side of my office was the men’s room, where the flushing never seemed to end through the eight inches of dry wall separating my creative haven from 4 urinals.

While the idea of a floating office might well have occurred to me in my situation at the PR firm, little did I know then that my next office would actually be afloat, about 100-feet directly offshore from Grant Park's Buckingham Fountain.

My job at the agency hadn't lasted, as my client had decided to take public relations in-house just about the time I accepted the job with their agency, so as the last person hired, I became the first to go. To compound issues, I was going through a divorce. I found myself out of work, and out of the apartment, simultaneously. So, I moved onto my boat. A few months later, I found promising new employment at another upcoming PR firm, then called Cooper and Golin, located on Michigan Avenue at the Chicago River, a brisk walk across the park from my boat mooring. My sole client was McDonald's, then of ascending hamburger fame, already with three thousand restaurants and newly listed on the New York Stock Exchange.

My compact cabin cruiser was moored in Grant Park harbor in the summer of 1974. Each night after work, wearing my new three-piece suit, I would cross the park with my briefcase, row out in my dingy to the boat opposite the fountain, go up the boarding ladder and spread my work papers out on the cabin's dinette table, where I had a small portable typewriter and a battery-powered lamp. But the ideal differed from reality, in that I was bobbing in the wind off lake Michigan, and my papers, sometimes along with the typewriter and lamp, would threaten to slide off onto the deck. After a few months of this, I moved ashore to the world of running water, showers and elevators. I rented a 32nd floor apartment in the Rush street neighborhood, with a distant view of the lake, and ironically, in an early October storm, the boat was ripped from its mooring and sank at the foot of the great fountain.

Having regained a foundation back on dry land, I was now officed at 360 North Michigan, on the very site of Chicago's Fort Dearborn, at the bridge at Wacker Drive, and my new digs had a million-dollar view from the 7th floor. I looked right across the river at the whitewashed Wrigley Building and old Chicago Sun-Times to the left, and the stately Chicago Tribune building to the right. The office had a partially glass wall next to the door, and fellow employees would often stop in the aisle outside to ogle the iconic city view over my shoulder.

Arriving shortly after dawn most days, I'd encounter the same city sanitation worker sweeping the curb in front of the building. One day I asked him what the city paid him, because it seemed to me he was only on duty for a few hours. It turned out, to my considerable chagrin, he was making more than I. Many evenings, not leaving the office until 7 or 8 pm, as I got off the elevator, famous jazz musicians would be tuning up on the staircase, before their performances at the London House nightclub, off the first floor lobby. Today, the building, originally built in 1923 as the London Guarantee Building, is the hot London House Hotel, and the space for my old office probably has a bed in it, with that great view across the Chicago River.

A few years later, the agency would move to a much more modern building in the heart of the Magnificent Mile, at 500 North Michigan Avenue, across from the Tribune Tower and the old Sheraton hotel. My newest office faced south, into another office building. But one of the biggest changes was that a new state-of-art electronic word processor opened up a revolution in writing speed and efficiency.

By the late-70's I was promoted to senior vice president and yet another new office. I was co-directing the global McDonald's account and also helping lead the agency's new business and creative review committees. This time, my view was to the east, squarely onto Michigan Avenue, and sited in a more comfortable space between the agency chairman and president at the two corners of the floor. Again, I would catch passers-by in the corridor outside my second floor office looking through the door to watch the ongoing parades, real and informal, along the Magnificent Mile just below.

While I loved working on the growing McDonald's account, where I directed everything from media relations, to marketing PR, to the accelerating Ronald McDonald House charity initiative, it became clear to me that I had reached my growth limit at the firm, as my boss was an agency partner and seemingly not going anywhere. So, I accepted a corporate staff position, at Baxter Laboratories, a Fortune 500 medical technology company. Their ultra modern headquarters in Deerfield is a few miles north of Allstate's complex on the 294 toll way. Why a hamburger guy in a high tech medical company? As head of corporate communications, Baxter's CEO thought I could bring McDonald's stronger connections to the consumer culture to their broadening

medical business. We soon were supporting popular medical shows as an underwriter on public television, and doing promotional events with high-profile athletes and other notables who had benefitted from Baxter technologies. A sky bridge to my building, which housed the communications and legal staffs, linked us to the executive wing building. There, I had a sleek gray-toned office, sporting floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking sprawling lawns, with blinds for privacy on the interior windows overlooking our administrative area. It would turn out to be my last office with an actual door.

When my wife and I took a vacation to Europe for my 40th birthday, we headed deep into the recesses of Germany's Black Forest, because I wanted to be as far away as possible from friends and associates who might razz me about what I saw as the dawn of my rapidly advancing age. When I returned to the office, I found that for the duration of our trip, the blinds on my inner office windows that overlooked the corridor to the executive building were hung with a banner reading, "Chuck Ebeling is 40. Don't tell anyone." So much for my hopes of hiding my melancholy in the Black Forest.

A couple years later, I read in the Tribune that another old McDonald's client who held the same position I had at Baxter, was leaving to move to the west coast. Recalling the warm relationships I had with my old McDonald's friends, and the chance for more direct connections to the consumer culture, I applied to become his replacement and soon moved to new quarters at McDonald's innovative home office in Oak Brook. Some architects say they begin their design of a new building by trying to tell the stories of the people who will work there. Franchising businesses like McDonald's then had an often-shady reputation because some of them would take a franchisee's money and make promises they didn't keep. McDonald's wanted their office to support the idea that with them, everything would be done in the open, transparently and honestly.

I found myself ensconced in a brightly spacious second-floor corner of the building, one of the first large modern headquarters in America built on a totally open office plan. Not a single office, including that of Ray Kroc, the chairman, had a door or walls to the ceiling. Everything was in the open, figuratively and literally, and everyone was accessible to one another. The building had some notable highlights. While the individual

office spaces were open, like cubicles today, the mahogany-paneled walls of the so-called task response modules between them were high, perhaps 9 feet, and contained desk surfaces, cabinets and bookshelves aplenty. And there were some private spaces. The executive office area, which housed vast open offices, had a glassed circular closed conference space lovingly called the War Room. It was not unusual to hear muffled yelling and thumping on the table from the aptly named War Room when top management was conferring.

The McDonald's home office, as they called it, also contained a top floor area called The Think Tank, a space then so original it wound up on the cover of Time magazine when the building was new in 1971.

The walls were softly padded and curving, the lighting muted, and one path led to a room with a few soft chairs where one or a few people could confer or practice a speech. Another path led to a room with biofeedback headphones and a deep chair and ottoman, where one could just contemplate or cool down.

It was here, at McDonald's worldwide home office, that my first encounters with the issues of office decorum took place. Not long after joining the company in 1985, the new trend to early Fridays and casual office dress caught up with us. Instead of coat and ties for men and dresses for the women, slacks and casual shirts and blouses were encouraged -- the country club look -- but no jeans or cut-offs or sleeveless tops. While the younger office corps was quick to embrace all this, many of us in so-called upwardly mobile management thought that leaders should still spruce up, so we would often wear a sport coat instead of a suit, along with colored shirts and patterned ties. One day the president of our U.S. division wandered into my office space on a Friday morning, and seeing my attire, called out for an admin assistant to bring him a scissors. He moved to cut off my tie, as an example to the staff, but I luckily stopped him short, exhorting that it was an expensive Nordstrom tie. He left me with a verbal warning to "dress down," loud enough for the entire floor to hear.

My second transgression was to have put in a work order for a word processor. At my downtown agency office, we had switched from Selectic typewriters to electronic word processors several years prior, even for the professional staff, as we all were writers. But McDonald's HQ was still on the old system, with admin assistants doing the typing,

from shorthand notes or hand written drafts from managers. Since I was a professional writer, I wanted my own word processor, even if an admin person would polish my work later. My request was turned down, so I appealed.

A few days later, that same U.S. President showed up in my space again, with my written appeal in hand. "No one in management uses these things," he puffed. "We have admin people for that, that's why they are out there," he chastised me. "But I write for a living," I retorted. After some discussion, he grumbled, "OK, but if I come by, I better see you using that dog-gone thing."

The communications state of the art then was the pocket pager. As I was the company's lead point person for crises and contingencies, I carried one with me at all times, and took home what we called "the football," a briefcase filled with all the corporate contingency plans and emergency contact information. It was not unusual to handle calls of violent acts, food safety issues and breaking news media situations at all hours of the night and on weekends, coming in from around the world. There was almost no such thing then as down time, or being off the grid.

And then there were the early days of cell phones, which helped extend the traditional office to wherever one happened to be. While today there are more than 5 billion in use worldwide, in 1987, when I purchased my first one, a Radio Shack "brick," there were a scant million in use. McDonald's wouldn't authorize one, so I bought my own for more than \$1500. I recall that my wife would not walk with me in downtown Chicago when I was using the new cell phone, as she thought it looked pretentious.

I brought that early cell phone with its walkie-talkie antenna to a press conference at the Ford Museum in Detroit. All the media people were on landline phones calling in their stories in the pressroom, and I stepped out into a patio and used my cell. As I looked back into the pressroom, several reporters were staring out the window in wonder at this revolutionary wireless communications tool.

In those days, I was spending at least three hours a day in my car, endlessly commuting between my apartment on the near north side and Oak Brook. In that mobile office, I would sometimes have the Wall Street Journal spread out on the steering wheel while sitting

stalled in traffic on the Eisenhower Expressway. Morning commutes were for talking with my counterparts in Europe over the car phone, and nightly commutes were for catching up on dozens of voicemails. Sometimes I would even miss my exit, as my mind was so caught up in these verbal transactions.

I had been the first with a cell, just as I had become the first company executive to have a personal computer at my desk in 1985. In the mid-90s, I became the only company person, other than the treasurer, to get my hands on another new form of technology, created by Michael Bloomberg. This innovative terminal allowed, for the first time, real time monitoring of global news and stock market activity. I was sometimes able to quickly provide the market with information that would balance out fast-breaking swings in our stock price due of news events or financial shifts, more than justifying the Bloomberg Terminal's high cost of thousands of dollars a month. And, we also became early adopters of satellite cell phones for emergency crisis management around the globe.

But my third transgression of corporate decorum involved good old-fashioned paper, and was detected by the CEO, himself. As I'd move through my business career, I'd developed the habit of piling up project work in stacks on and around my desk, for easy reference. Even though my assistants kept many correspondence files and project files in the usual cabinets and storage places, I'd found it handy to keep my work in progress in these little pyramids of paper all over my office, from the desk and chairs to shelves and even on the floor. One day, the CEO made a rare visit to my office and I wasn't around. He was aghast at the apparent chaos he found. As he departed, he yelled out to my superior, who had the office next door, "Tell Ebeling to clean up that blanked, blank mess." I coped with his admonition, passed on to me with enthusiastic vigor from my boss, the only way I knew how. I simply ignored it.

Albert Einstein once famously asked: "If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk a sign?" Conventional wisdom holds that it's easier to work, and to create, in a space that's neat and tidy — but what if the opposite were true?

A recent study by psychologist Kathleen Vohs, at the University of Minnesota, tested the effects of different kinds of working

environments on human behavior. Some participants worked in a neat office, while others worked in a messy one.

Participants in both rooms came up with equal numbers of ideas, on average, but those in the messy room were evaluated as having more interesting and creative ideas. And in another part of the study, when participants who had been working in the neat and messy rooms were given a choice between an established product and a new one, those in the messy room were more likely to pick the new one.

Concluded psychologist Vohs: “Disorderly environments seem to inspire breaking free of tradition, which can produce fresh insights, Orderly environments, in contrast, encourage convention and playing it safe.”

The final and most disorderly office of my business career was at McDonald’s then-new campus in Oak Brook, on 88 acres of forest adjoining the Butler National Golf Club. There are three principal buildings: the Campus Office Building is the 255 thousand square foot nerve center of the corporation. It is a three story contemporary prairie school style building settled into the landscape opposite two lakes, with underground parking to preserve the habitat. Constructed of red brick and local fieldstone, it also includes 15,000 square feet of labs and test kitchens, as well as a full-sized McDonald’s restaurant, which serves both as employee cafeteria and executive dining room. A second business structure is the home of Hamburger University, the global training center. Across a curving bridge over Lake Fred, named for Fred Turner, who was Ray Kroc’s successor as Chairman and CEO, sits the third, the McDonald’s Lodge, a complete private hotel facility managed by Hyatt Corporation, for the students at HU and guests to the campus.

It is not a campus one would expect for a hamburger company noted for its consistency and modernity. While the structures, at least internally, assert their practical roles, their setting yields to the environment. Half of the campus surrounding the buildings is woodlands, with more than 1500 mature trees, and abounds with white-tailed deer, red fox, Canadian geese, mallard ducks and screech owls. The home office, completed in 1988, was ahead of its time, architecturally and environmentally. By 2011, a national survey

showed that 77% of companies preferred open, collaborative workspaces like those McDonald's had created decades before.

When I became a company officer, my office space was doubled in size. It included a semi-circular desk, more than a score of built-in wooden cabinets and a matching conference table, all overlooking, through 12-foot high windows, a lake, a helipad and the 7th hole of the Butler National Golf Course, a course I never had the time to play. It was from this office that, in the late 90s, we launched McDonald's first global newsroom on the Internet.

Fifty feet down the wide sky-lighted hall, lined with modern art, much of it depicting McDonald's situations, was the senior management space, where the C-suite officers were all housed. Their offices were situated in the exact vertical and horizontal center of the pin-wheeled three-story building, as if contributing to the non-hierarchical image of top management. The chairman had a glass wall overlooking the building's main concourse, so everyone could see him at work. However, he did have a switch that would instantly fog the glass for privacy. One downfall of the open design was that when Fred Turner fogged his glass and his temperature flared, as it sometimes did, his powerful lungs could clear out the open wing, as assistants maneuvered to get out of his range.

Next to the senior management space was the boardroom, known as the Mac Room. Unlike most boardrooms, it was circular in shape and on two levels. It was once featured in Fortune Magazine for its unusual design, created not only to represent a hamburger, but to help participants, both those on the board of directors and others using it for meetings, feel that all were of equal standing and all voices would be heard. It was a nice thought, though all knew full well who was in charge.

But as I observed at the outset of this talk, offices as we have known them are changing. A few years after retiring, I worked on a confidential futures strategy for McDonald's called Project 361. Our goal was to seek new business ventures that could be built upon McDonald's core competencies. Our skunk works were in a sleek Loop office, with a modular layout that could be changed around as the program developed. A fung shui expert was brought in from

Germany to optimize the highly flexible work environment.

Now, this very summer, McDonald's announced plans to sell its scenic Oak Brook office campus, designed back in the 80s by Chicago star-kitect Dirk Lohan, and follow the trend to attract younger contemporary management by moving to more compact urban HQ space, at the site of Oprah Winfrey's old Harpo Studios in the city's hot Near West Side.

My own last office at the Oak Brook campus became a very personal space. Next to my phone and my old green-glass banker's light, was a photo taken more than 20 years before at my wedding reception at Chicago's Racquet Club. It shows my wife and me at the dinner table, holding up a box of those ubiquitous McDonald's fries, which my friends had surprised me with before the real dinner was served. Behind my desk sat a stainless steel rack of colorful test tubes, attesting to my days at Baxter Labs. A spring-powered model Toyota sports car stood ready to fly past my computer. On the wall behind me was a charcoal drawing of a gracious house, not mine, but the original Chicago Ronald McDonald House near Children's Hospital, opened in 1976. And of course, covering the rest of my desk and back table and floor were those teetering piles of files I always kept close at hand.

In the mid-90s, Vicki and I took a sabbatical, including our first two-week vacation since our wedding in 1978. I began to think of stepping off the "Ad Officium" merry-go-round.

As a plan to retire at the Millennium took shape, in a final New York business trip with our new chairman, he kindly offered to tear up my draft retirement agreement, and said, "let's retire together in ten years." But I knew the time was right. I wanted to unplug, make a change of pace and exercise my curiosity. At my retirement party, in a weak take-off on Ernest Hemingway's infamous "Moveable Feast," I noted that I'd spent much of my golden salad days in the 1970's with McDonald's national PR agency, then from the mid-80s through all the 90s as the main course of my career as the corporation's chief spokesperson, and then in the new 21st century I could begin the savory dessert course of so-called retirement, and this final course, like dessert, would prove veraciously sweet.

My closing days in the office were also the very last days of a century, at the end of December 1999. I was set to retire on the very cusp of the Millennium, reminding my friends and associates of what I mentioned at the top of this story, that I felt I had worked in the corporate world enough in one century, and would not be doing that in another. I wound up taking home more than 40 cases of files and memorabilia. The pack rat was moving these “files” into the basement beneath the library of our Wisconsin home, which we call Applewood Lodge, deep in the woods just south of Lake Geneva.

The substantial oak desk in our compact library, where I now do my work, such as it is, sits alongside a wall of books. They overlook me, like so many old friends, including a shelf of Samuel Johnson for more of his sage advice, like writing about, “the procurement of petty duties.” There is a cozy red leather wing chair and ottoman -- great for quiet reading. The southern view from the desk, where I’ve written a baker’s dozen of papers for the Literary Club, is of the grand old apple tree in front of the house, then out to a low curving wall of Wisconsin river stones, with a tree-lined prairie beyond.

But to enjoy this bucolic view I have to peer around another kind of apple, this one a substantial silver computer screen. It seems technology looms almost everywhere. There is a livelier apple-themed barrier too -- our eldest cat, Cider. He likes to jump onto the desk right in front of that screen and place his front paws on my chest, or dance on the keyboard, just as he did while I was typing out some of this piece.

My retirement office is still cluttered, with model ships, and mementos of my career. One I especially like is a two-foot tall statue of a smiling and waving Ronald McDonald, made of Lego bricks, which reminds me of how much fun, what I called work could often be. Nostalgia sometimes walks me back through those remembered offices of a century past. A “century past!”

Perhaps we actually were the last generation that needed offices. An office is not now, and never really was required to define success or dignity in work. Yet I still happily duck into my latest home office nearly every morning, cup of coffee in hand, softly nudging aside the

ever-curious cat. I reach around the growing stacks of papers on my desk, and check out the ubiquitous Internet, to see what's new in another day, "Ad Officium."