

# The Office Jungle: A Vision for Wildness to Turn Offices into Jungles

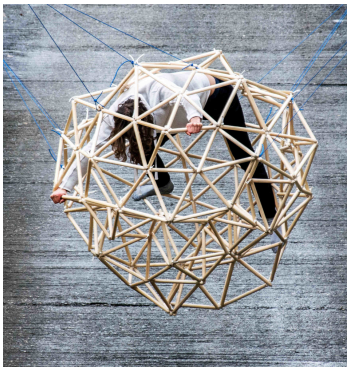


Figure 1. The Office Jungle

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## Abstract

The Office Jungle is an experimental office environment designed to make offices more “wild”. Through this demonstration and associated design vision, we make a first attempt to reflect on and to define what characterizes wildness and how it could empower people in more playful and active lifestyles, particularly in the workplace. In our understanding, wildness is not an exclusive property of nature, but rather a condition that can be designed for. How wildness can be designed is described here in a set of design principles called “Design for Wildness”, inspired by the work of Gibson. The Office Jungle, a large geodesic sphere of 2 meters in diameter, is part and parcel of these design principles and can be used as a tool to design other wild environments. Such environments could benefit people working in the office, many of whom have been suffering the consequences of a sedentary lifestyle.

## Keywords

Design for Wildness; The Office Jungle; Design Vision; Phenomenology; Ecological Psychology

## CSS Concepts

•Human-centered computing~Interaction design~Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms

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Figure 2. The Office Jungle

### A Vision on Wildness

Think of the wind brushing over a field of wheat, the waves stirring the surface of the ocean or the erratic fluttering of a butterfly. Some people can't be bothered looking at such trifle displays, while others find themselves spellbound. For the first group of people nothing eventful is happening, but for the second group it's like watching the universe being born again and again. What is it that makes these spectacles special? They are wild. Examples of wildness can be found everywhere, even inside our own bodies. Our heartbeat is wild; its beats are never exactly regular, but always just a little out of phase. Even our dreams and thoughts are wild; for most people they are as uncontrollable as the weather.

The cultural ecologist David Abram describes wildness as: "the earthly, untamed, undomesticated state of things – open-ended, improvisational, moving according to its own boisterous logic. That which is wild is not really out of control; it is simply out of our control. Wildness is not a state of disorder, but a condition whose order is not imposed from outside." [1] Wildness is therefore different than chaos. Chaos describes an absence of order, while wildness describes a level of order so complex that it exceeds our capacity for understanding or our ability to control it.

Wildness can only be grasped (intuitively) by first-hand experience; wildness needs to be engaged in order to be known. Take for example sailors engaging the waves and winds of the ocean. The ocean is a very wild environment. Sailing on the ocean requires one to pay close attention to ones' surroundings; what is the wind doing? Do the sails need to be adjusted? How is the weather looking ahead? Are there any other ships that I

need to watch out for? But apart from the act of sailing, simply living on a sailing boat can be challenging. The tossing about of the boat makes walking a constant balancing act, not to mention trying to pour yourself a hot cup of coffee while the whole room is tilting 15 degrees to one side and then 15 degrees to the other side. Truly wild environments, like the ocean, demand to be engaged actively; engaged, that is, with all one's senses and cognitive-motor skills. Choosing not to engage or failing to engage effectively means putting yourself in danger. Fortunately, we are evolutionarily adapted for this type of engagement. Throughout our evolutionary history we have lived in wild environments, from the early Homo sapiens living as primitive nomads, to the Homo erectus as the first bipedal apes roaming the plains of Africa, to our many arboreal ancestors living in the jungle. Whether we were hunting prey, avoided being preyed upon or simply in contending the elements, we have a natural ability for engaging wild environments. Our demonstration aims at allowing fellow designers and researchers to experience this vision of wildness first-hand.

### The Office Jungle

To get a feel for what wildness means we sought recourse in some natural phenomena, but the remaining sections will focus on how wildness can be designed for. Designed wildness is somewhat different from natural wildness. Designed wildness is a more friendly type of wildness and better suited to the needs of the human environment. There would be no point in recreating the same wildness we initially tried to protect ourselves from by building shelters. Designed wildness is, therefore, a more inviting than demanding type of wildness, one that challenges people on their



Figure 3. Testing the structure of The Office Jungle

own terms. Such an environment could benefit people working in the office, many of whom have been suffering the consequences of a sedentary lifestyle [2].

The Office Jungle is a product exemplifying what designed wildness can look like. The Office Jungle is a geodesic sphere of 2 meters in diameter made from Ashwood rods of roughly 30cm in length that are tied together with polyester rope (Figure 1). Although the rope connecting the nodes is hardly visible it has a profound effect on how the structure behaves. With 92 nodes, all able to fold inward and outward, the structure deforms as if made from soft clay. Another feature that makes The Office Jungle compelling are the extension springs by which it is suspended. These are specially designed to give the structure a pleasant bounciness. This bounciness can be either relaxing or energizing, depending on how one moves (Figure 2). What makes the design of The Office Jungle wild are the following features.

1. The number of “edges” that afford grip
2. The complex spatial configuration
3. The number of (relatively) free moving parts
4. The open-endedness of the design
5. The larger-than-human size of the structure
6. The natural material of wood
7. The contrasting mechanical properties of the materials used, the rigidity of the wooden rods, the flexibility of the rope and the bounciness of the springs.

The Office Jungle is part and parcel of a set of design principles called “Design for Wildness” that can be used as a tool to design other wild environments. Design for Wildness takes inspiration from Gibson book The

Ecological Approach to Visual Perception [3] The principles complement each other and to a certain degree need each other to be fulfilled. The word “structure” is used as an alternative for the word “furniture” or “piece of furniture”.

### Design for Wildness Principles

Reflecting upon our vision through the making process, we derived nine principles to design for Wildness.

1. Edge-over-surface
2. Structural support
3. Larger-than-human
4. Structures within structures
5. Positive emptiness
6. Dynamic – static
7. Easy to adapt
8. Elements of surprise
9. User independent activity

#### *Edge-over-surface*

Structures ought to be designed with a particular attention for their edges and not their surfaces. Edges afford interaction possibilities; they can be grabbed, held or manipulated. Ideally, edges are never sharp but always rounded. Note that a composite surface can be created by a grid of edges, like a net.

#### *Structural support*

As many structures as possible ought to be designed to be able to carry a person’s weight. If people can trust in the structural integrity of their surroundings, they might be more inclined to play with it. Fear of breaking something or fear of using something inappropriately disincentivizes people from trying new things.



Figure 4. Different form of The Office Jungle presented in the office environment

Bookcases, for example, can double perfectly as climbing structures.

### *Larger-than-human*

Structures ought to be designed to be larger-than-human and, if possible, reach from wall to wall or floor to ceiling. When structures are larger than people, particularly in height, then people must use their whole body to surmount those structures or to move between them. This principle gets rid of the floor as the only accessible part of a space.

### *Structures within structures*

Structures ought to be designed to accommodate other structures, especially by nesting them within each other. When structures are nested within each other the interaction possibilities multiply. Secondly, nested structures give the opportunity to demarcate private spaces from public spaces.

### *Positive emptiness*

Structures ought to be designed to leave enough room for people to make unobstructed movements. Positive space (structures) and negative space (air) need to be balanced.

### *Dynamic – static*

Some structures ought to have the internal ability to move or deform either by using materials that are flexible, bendable, stretchable or foldable, or by using mechanisms such as rotaries, rails or ball-joints. Dynamic structures inspire playfulness and curiosity. They are often more challenging to master too. However, a balance ought to be sought between dynamic structures and static structures, as they complement each other.

### *Easy to adapt*

Some structures ought to be easy to adapt by the user. That way an environment can grow together with the needs and creativity of the user. Even though such structures might be mass-produced, variation between structures will start to occur naturally.

### *Elements of surprise*

Some structures ought to be designed to incorporate an element of surprise. Hidden levers or paracord disguised as rope can make a structure a little more unpredictable, mysterious and challenging.

### *User independent activity*

The previous principles are good for creating wild environments that are user-driven. All activity depends on the user. But when some structures start to use sensors and actuators to manipulate themselves and their surroundings these environments could become truly wild.

## Conclusion

By exhibiting our work, we want to allow the audience to experience this provocative vision of wildness first-hand. We are thereby opening up a debate to question the status quo of built environments and its impact on people's behaviors and routines.

## References

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