

Corin Anderson does not work like most of the world: his office is a glass tent, which he shares with two other people. His desk hides behind a complex Rube Goldberg-esque maze, built by Anderson out of a toy called the Chaos Tower, a sort of theme park for marbles. Each day he sits in the midst of figurines, Legos, and stuffed animals, eyes fixed on his computer screen and earphones strapped on, for hours at a stretch. When he wants a snack, he walks to the fully stocked micro-kitchen, maybe breaking open a bag of organic potato chips or grabbing a handful of trail mix. Twenty percent of the time—with his employer's full approval—he works on projects of his own devising that are only tangentially related to his job. And strangest of all, come nightfall he often has no desire to go home, preferring to get dinner, gratis, in one of the employee cafés, followed by a few hours playing a strategic card game with some colleagues in a small meeting room.

Anderson is a software engineer at Google, which might make him one of the most valuable human-resource commodities in the world. Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the maverick cofounders of the company, are fanatical about at least two things: preserving Google's geek Shangri-la culture and changing the way the world searches for information. (They must be at least mildly interested in a third—making money—but any talk of cash is considered distinctly un-Googley.) In early 2004, as they were preparing to announce the hotly anticipated IPO that would make them both billionaires, Page and Brin knew that their search engine needed to stay fast and relevant, which meant their stable of engineers had to do the same. They were already attracting top talent, skimming the cream off each season's fresh crop of PhDs. So they turned their gaze inward, hiring New York workplace consultant DEGW and the L.A.-based design firm Clive Wilkinson Architects to reexamine and redesign the Googleplex, the company's Mountain View, California, headquarters.

A tall, jovial Brit by way of South Africa, Clive Wilkinson is best known for his genre-busting Chiat\Day offices, the first was in a Frank Gehry-designed building fronted by a pair of Claes Oldenburg binoculars in Venice, California, where ad agency meetings took place in the "boardroom"—at a long meeting table made of surfboards. The space was a collection of vibrant,

eclectic open offices that loosened up the concept of work, designed for creative people much like Wilkinson and his team. He has also created a new campus for the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising that feels more like a boutique hotel than a school.

At entry level the Googleplex—where the core of the engineering group is housed, along with the cofounders' top-secret offices—feels like another signature space for creative types. The buzzing open space was conceived, designed, and built out in just under a year in one of Google's existing buildings. Wilkinson imagined it as a "town square," an urban meeting point fed by visitors coming in from the lobby, flanked by cafés and dominated by a grand central staircase that encourages people to sit on its steps with outlets for laptops. At lunchtime the high-ceilinged space is crowded with groups of coworkers eating together in front of a whiteboard at least 20 feet long, where Googlers keep adding to a jokey operational flowchart. (The steps to building a space elevator, something that the cofounders have been advocating half seriously for years, include "Hire rogue scientists" and "Hire Richard Branson.") A couple of guys in Google T-shirts wrestle with each other, someone whizzes past the window on an electric scooter, and everywhere people are sipping on fresh coconuts punched with straws.

The convivial atmosphere was something the cofounders, who were very involved with the design process, wanted to foster. For Wilkinson, who is accustomed to clients demanding revolutionary work spaces, this was nothing unusual. However, after spending time with Page and Brin and the Google engineers that would occupy the building, Wilkinson realized that he was dealing with a distinctly different species of personnel. "We've always worked with people who were a mix of left and right brain," Wilkinson says, "but engineers are very left brain. They might work in teams, but they require a high level of concentration; they sit in front of the computer and crunch formulas in the most extraordinary way." Despite the fun, "it's a very demanding work culture," says Andrew Laing of DEGW, who has done workplace research studies with other technology companies such as Microsoft. "It's

designed almost as a living environment—it's much more like being at a university than being in a conventional work environment."

The learning curve was steep for Wilkinson's entire team. "I started to feel like physical space was almost too primitive a world for these people," says Alexis Rappaport, a principal in Wilkinson's office. The cofounders were convinced that their physical space was important, but their approach to it had always been pragmatic. Google's frugal, slapdash approach to its offices was a point of pride; the fast-growing company would expand into the abandoned offices of another defunct tech outfit and settle in hermit crab-style, reusing furniture and floor plans.

In the beginning the designers and the engineers had a difficult time adjusting to one another. Page and Brin were less interested in the aesthetics of the space—for a time they lobbied for Google's signature lava lamps and toys—than in circulation and flow. Like their engineers, the cofounders were all about solutions—a series of fixes that happen fast and smart. Wilkinson sometimes felt like he was speaking a different language, one more concerned with an overarching vision eager to explore conceptual ideas. His team also had to adjust to the reality of the engineers' workday, which is more anchored to a computer than those of their usual range of clients.

Initially Google wanted Wilkinson to work like an engineer, asking both his firm and the Chicago-based Environments Group to come up with full schematic designs for the space in hopes of incorporating the best elements of the two, an approach the company often takes when solving engineering problems. But instead they ultimately settled on only one firm, after their advisors convinced them that their original strategy wasn't the way to get an optimal design. "Most engineers focus so much on how things work and how they're going to work for them," says advisory team member Mary Davidge, a workplace design consultant who has overseen corporate headquarters and campus planning for other advanced technology companies, such as EBay, Yahoo!, and Apple. "The way the space is going to look and feel is often not as important to them. They're also often less willing to let the designer design it. They're used to developing solutions."

When Wilkinson realized that the engineers needed to see clear-cut reasoning behind design decisions, he began to present his plans as a series of solutions, and then Google became receptive. They were especially fond of a typology of work spaces that Wilkinson's office developed. "We tried to create a whole variety of experiences," Rappaport says. After examining the ways that employees actually used their space, the architects came up with a list of 13 different zones and arranged them from hot ("clubhouse": pool table and lounge area) to cold (closed workrooms), depending on the level of interaction they encourage. Each floor of the building was divided into five or six flexible neighborhoods separated by "landmarks," the shared public spaces that are the center of Google life. There are kitchens full of snacks, lounges with pool tables and comfortable seating, and libraries of stacked plywood box shelves filled with books and games that Googlers have brought in from home and based on, Wilkinson says, "the idea of the village library as the repository of thought." On either end of the floor is a structure that looks like a cross between a tree house and a guard tower, used for meetings and offices. In the center atrium, overlooking the grand staircase, is a group of larger, more luxurious meeting rooms. Other small meeting rooms take the shape of yurts—another Wilkinson creation—which look like little padded igloos and are easily assembled or torn down.

The solution de resistance, though, is the glass tents. Page and Brin knew their engineers needed quiet to concentrate on programming, yet the company was also dedicated to packing three or four people into an office, a configuration that the cofounders liked from their Stanford grad-school days. They wanted to achieve that without resorting to an impersonal warren of cubicles or a hierarchical system of corner offices, which would have belied their mostly flat management structure. Despite the priority on concentration, face time is valued, along with the sort of serendipitous encounters that might stimulate new ideas between engineers not working closely together.

Page and Brin are also fanatical about air quality and preservation of natural daylighting but insisted on having offices alongside almost all of the windows. Wilkinson's group designed an ingenious system of tented glass

offices that allows daylight to stream through the window-side offices and into the center of the floor while preserving acoustic integrity. The white canopies are made of an acrylic-coated polyester, quilted together with polyester-fiber fill. They help reflect light into the rest of the office and are topped by a neat unobtrusive unit that contains lighting, HVAC, sprinklers, and an air diffuser. At intervals panels of glass are glazed in color combos that identify each office neighborhood.

"In the beginning there was a lot of open office," site architect Ruben Smudde says. "By the end it was a lot of closed office." In its early years Google was an unusually open company. The algorithms behind its search engine were published as an academic paper, the entire fledgling company was a Stanford engineering department PhD project, and Page and Brin—dubbed the "Google guys"—always spoke freely to journalists. But after a few questionable moves—including an interview with *Playboy* given during the SEC's mandated pre-IPO "quiet period"—the company began to close ranks while still trying to maintain a veneer of openness. "Don't Be Evil" is Google's informal motto, but a recent spate of Evil Empire-style moves—caving in to the Chinese government's demands that they censor certain Web sites, enabling ads that seemed to "read" your Gmail, placing long-term "cookies" on your hard drive that retain information on your searches—have made its longtime supporters wary and has drawn so much bad press that Google can seem almost paranoid in its interactions with the outside world. Yet sometimes they're unexpectedly candid. In a recent interview with *Time*, CEO Eric Schmidt said, "We try very hard to look like we're out of control. But in fact the company is very measured. And that's part of our secret."

That mix of openness and control is reflected in the Google campus, a dichotomy that Wilkinson's team was quick to intuit. "As we learned more about the company and realized that this building was mostly for engineers, we knew we wanted to do a very clear, clean space without it being labeled as a tech space—not something that's all metal, for example. We were creating a framework for everyone to make their own space," Smudde says. The framework would be meticulously designed, and the engineers would provide the veneer of

beautiful chaos. "What was brilliant about Clive's design is that it's a bright white, light space that becomes almost a neutral background for all the stuff they were going to throw at it," Laing says. "If you'd designed a space that tried to be Googley, it would have been too much."

When the engineers first moved in, there was some debate over whether the space had actually achieved Googleness. "At first some of them hated the space," Wilkinson says. But that was because, Laing says, "people didn't fill it up right away, and it felt a bit empty and unevolved. Google likes the buzz and the crowdedness. They love the intense interaction that happens when people are in the same space. It's not a very mature company—and I mean this in the best of ways—where people are off doing their own things." Now the space is full—the bookshelves are crowded and each office bursts with extras. If the Googleplex exploded, the employees would have a hard time digging themselves out of a shower of pirate flags, action figures, T-shirts with funny sayings, leis, ironic signs, a fringed leather vest, thousands of game pieces, and giant Lego people. Much of it was acquired when the company launched a contest for the best office soon after moving in. Each group was given a small budget, and thematic frivolity ensued.

Anderson's office, of course, took one of the top prizes. In many ways he is Google's ur-engineer. His desk merits a stop on the office tour. He is the first (and only) employee suggested as a potential interviewee. He embodies all of the traits that Page and Brin see in themselves: positive and supersmart, with a PhD from a top school and the conviction that Google is changing the world for the better. The early dictum of the Web was that all information wants to be free. It is a utopian vision of the Internet that many engineers still hold onto with a fervent college student sort of idealism. Google may not be able to keep information entirely free, but it can still try to create a workplace utopia—a world beyond worlds where everyone is smart, and invention and necessity coexist. The impulse is both beautiful and endlessly arrogant, an adolescent's willful dream. Any utopia in the end is a form of benevolent dictatorship. Though the cofounders wanted an office that encouraged a work-life balance, it can be argued that this is just a twenty-

first-century version of the company town, where work and life become hopelessly intertwined. But Google the company is being forced into maturity—by the IPO, by the fact that Web pages that don't appear on Google might as well not exist, and by its sheer size, power, and influence. Hiring DEGW and Wilkinson was the act of a company toying with the idea of growing up. Deciding, as Google did, to complete just this one building rather than implementing the campus-wide master plan that they originally asked for was a decision to grow up on its own terms. For Google it's another in a long line of rebellions that just might work.