

ON EXHIBIT **China Contemporary: Architecture, Photography and Visual Culture** [opens June 10, Netherlands Architecture Institute, Rotterdam; www.nai.nl] **Hans Finsler and Swiss Photographic Culture Work: Modern Design 1932-1960** [opens June 10, Museum of Design Zurich; www.museum-gestaltung.ch]



Reaction Office Douglas Ball returns to the workplace— and this time he means business.

Herman Miller accidentally spawned a monster in 1965 with its panel-based Action Office prototype, the immediate precursor to the much-maligned cubicle farms that dominate North American offices today. Canadian designer Douglas Ball, one of the earliest pioneers in modern office furniture systems, created his own panel system, Pas, in 1972,

and the memory of its first installation still haunts him. “I walked into the building expecting to be very excited about what I’d see, and I came out extremely depressed,” he says, recalling a paper-pushing purgatory of dropped ceilings and uniform partition heights. “It was Dilbertville.”

In the ensuing decades, Ball abandoned panels and won praise for his post-based Race system and self-contained “capsule”-style Clipper workstation. He’d sworn off office systems entirely by the time Herman Miller called in 2002 seeking a new design to address some of the most nettlesome problems in workplaces, but the chance to address unfinished business made him reconsider.

Developed over three years, Ball’s My Studio Environments encourage interaction in an open-plan space without disrupting workers’ concentration. The system rotates the worker outward, while a sliding 81-inch-high panel of translu-

cent patterned glass on the aisle side preserves a sense of shelter. Though the arrangement ensures enough privacy for covert job-hunting and instant messaging, it also creates a sense of community. Colleagues are aware of the worker’s presence behind glass, no one can be snuck up on, and the system’s sliding shutters foster collaboration with neighbors.

Ball’s team modeled My Studio—which includes a deep desk, long credenza, and optional storage closet and easel—on a cockpit, putting the worker at the center with everything at arm’s reach. But beyond merely streamlining the unit, Ball also improved its looks, with homey curvilinear construction and glass, steel, and wood components. “Charles Eames once said, ‘It all happened in a flash—a 30-year flash,’” he notes. “We can say exactly the same thing.” www.hermanmiller.com
JESSE ASHLOCK