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METROPOLIS
Features November 1999

Greater than the sum of its parts: Ayse Birsel's point geometry makes for a revolutionary office system that encourages community.

Post-Cubist

How a hip, young, Turkish designer is breaking down the square American office system.

By Matt Steinglass
Photography by François Robert

In the fall of 1996, Ayse Birsel came home to find one of those answering-machine messages that fill your spirit with joy and persuade you that your troubles are merely farcical misunderstandings that will soon be resolved. Shakespeare-style, by the intervention of a beneficent higher power. Birsel, at the time a 30ish industrial designer best known for the sleekly ergonomic, deodorizing toilet seat (complete with bidet-type water jets and handy remote control) she created for the Japanese bathroom-fixture giant Toto, had been feeling down on her luck. Her yearlong partnership with Bruce Hannah, a professor in the industrial design department at Pratt, had broken up over philosophical differences. Birsel had moved out of their shared offices and into a tiny, rather dispiriting space on lower Broadway in New York. For the first time in her career, she was entirely on her own. A couple of months had slipped by, and she still hadn't gotten around to sending everyone her new phone number; she was feeling too unsettled.

Then she came home to the message. It was from a representative of Herman Miller Inc., one of the biggest office-furniture corporations in America. They had been unable to find her, the representative said; they'd finally tracked down her home number in the white pages. They wanted to fly her to their headquarters near Grand Rapids, Michigan, to respond to the question: If you were Bob Propst today, how would you design Action Office?

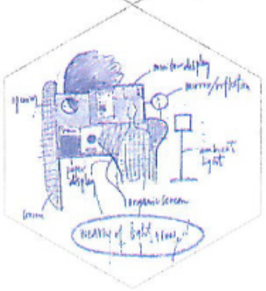
For the average Joe on the street, that question probably wouldn't cue any stomach butterflies; if you are a young industrial designer, however, it's as heady a challenge as they come. Bob Propst is arguably the single most significant figure in the history of American office furniture. In 1968, he created Herman Miller's Action Office II, the world's first "office system" made entirely of mobile, recombinable elements. In essence, Propst invented the cubicle—the environment in which, according to the International Facility Management Association, 58 percent of American office workers now spend their days (and, this being America, most of their evenings, too). So it was sort of like a young director getting a call from a studio executive at 20th Century Fox asking how, if you were George Lucas today, you would make *Star Wars*.

The presentation Birsel gave to Herman Miller began: "If I were Bob Propst today, I would be a 70-year-old white man." The line sounds a bit clumsy and p.c., but she must have delivered it well, because the folks in Grand Rapids cracked up. And at a cannier level, it was exactly the right answer. Birsel is mani-

festly not an old white man; she is a young Turkish woman. Her work is permeated by themes of light and flow. Gardens and fountains are recurring elements. For a company looking to go beyond 30 years of hard-edged cubicles and to distance itself from the legacy of the efficiency expert and the gray flannel suit, Birsel had the right aura. Today, three years later, Ayse Birsel, 35, is preparing to unveil Resolve, the office system that Herman Miller expects will blow the steel-edged panel partitions off the workplace of the twenty-first century.

You won't find pictures of Resolve on the Herman Miller Web site or in any of its promotional materials. Apart from a preview display at this year's NeoCon furniture show, the system is being kept tightly under wraps until its release early next year. Like the Stealth fighter in the late Eighties, it is scarcely even referred to by name. To get a firsthand glimpse of this top-secret project, you can either suspend yourself from the underbelly of a refreshment truck going through the service gate of Herman Miller's headquarters, or you can arrange to visit the rather unassuming offices of Ayse Birsel's firm, Olive 1:1, which are still in the same building on lower Broadway, though now in a somewhat larger space.

The woman who answers the door of Olive 1:1 does not conform at all to the image I had formed of Ayse Birsel. She is tall and narrow-boned, with fair skin, long, straight hair, and markedly Northern European features, and she seems even younger than Birsel could possibly be. As it turns out, this is because she isn't Ayse Birsel; she is one of Birsel's senior designers, Stefanie Kubanek, who hails from Cologne. Birsel has been delayed looking at real estate in Brooklyn. Would I care to wait in the reception area," to my right, is a sort of hexagonal prism, I look around. The "reception area," to my right, is a sort of hexagonal prism, composed of lengths of sheer, orange patterned fabric stretched between steel poles. The rest of the office's workstations and open spaces are delineated by similar pieces of variegated fabric, also stretched between networks of poles, that are punctuated by projecting lighting, desks, and overhead shades. The fabric and other elements hang from horizontal steel arms, springing from the upright poles at 120-degree angles. Cheery little removable colored signs branch off from the steel poles; one says "Back in Five!" A tall metallic screen, curving towards a narrow apex like a shard of pottery or a section of the Sydney Opera House, is the only solid vertical surface in sight. I seem to be in some sort of machine-tooled nomadic encampment.



There is no one in the office but Stefanie and me, and I can't quite imagine sitting down in the reception yurt while she goes back to work. We would be in plain view of each other, around the fabric; it would be too awkward. So instead we wind up talking. Stefanie, I learn, attended the Royal College of Art in London.

Whenever she flies to Europe, no matter where she's going, she flies first to Amsterdam, because you can take a shower in the airport.

In an office of panel-system cubicles, I would have sat awkwardly in a reception area while Stefanie went back to her workstation. In a Resolve space, we didn't do that; we were thrown together into conversation. By the time Ayse Birsel comes in a few minutes later, chatting excitedly in French with her husband Felix, Stefanie and I are having a grand old time; and, with Ayse, her husband, and her business partner Leah Caplan, we immediately settle down to lunch.

"The system we have downstairs is a year old," Birsel tells me when we move upstairs to talk in private. "Since then there have been two iterations, but the fundamental idea is the same: the system is made up of points."

I look a bit blank at this. Birsel elaborates.

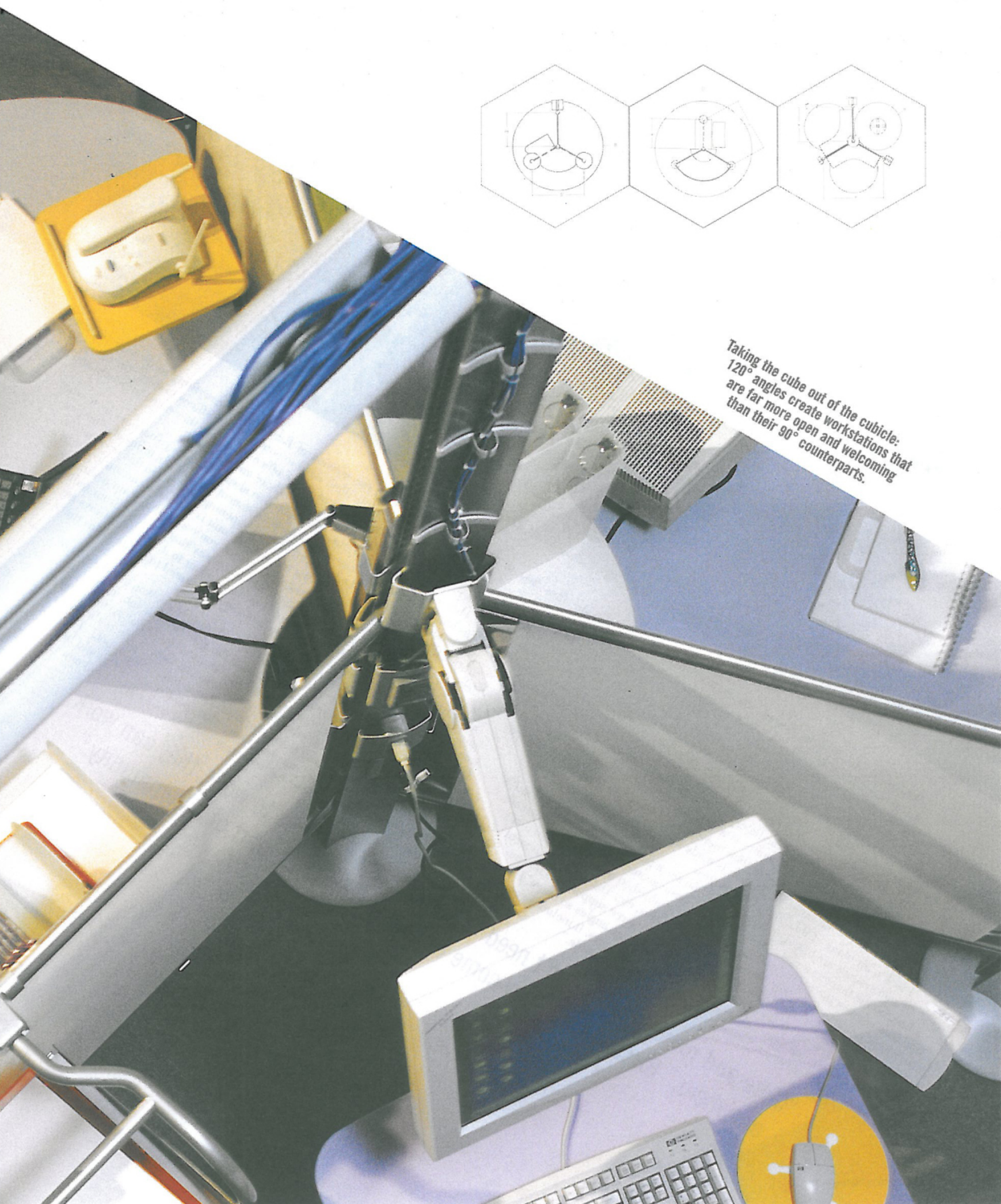
"Panel systems are based on lines. When you see a panel system in plan view, it's a line. So the thought was, Let's start with the basic geometry of the point, instead, and then connect the points as we need to. So we established these poles, and that's also where you get your connections, power, data cables, etc. The most economical structure to hold up a vertical pole like this is one with three supports each separated by 120 degrees, and that's why we relied on 120-degree angles so much. But 120 degrees is also a much more welcoming corner than 90 degrees. It includes you, whereas with a 90-degree corner, you're kind of pushed to the outside."

In Birsel's telling, the mission of Resolve has everything to do with inclusion. "More and more, people don't need to come to their offices to work, they can work anywhere. So why do they come to the office? I believe they come to belong and to be part of a community. They come to share and to learn."

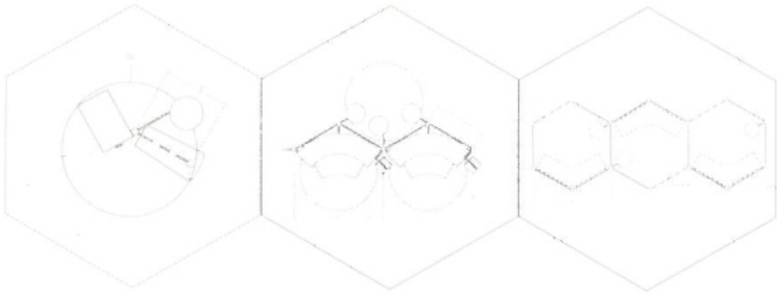
Hence the fabric partitions. "We wanted to always provide visual cues as to what was happening beyond your immediate environment. Not only in terms of other people, but also in terms of daylight and what's happening outside. So this system uses fabrics that are translucent. Plus the fact that the unit is defined by an angle of 120 degrees—and that its space is triangular—means you cannot block up a window with it. Its geometry asks you to place it in such a way that it's away from walls, away from windows. So it has this flow of both light and air to it. You can always get glimpses of what's happening in your depth of vision. I wanted to create vistas that would go past your immediate corner."

One of the first concerns this construct raises involves privacy. Won't workers who can see the person in the next space over, through the gaps between fabric and pole, end up feeling exposed? Birsel doesn't think so. "In panel [cubicle] systems you don't have as many cues as to whether the person who sits next to you is there or not. So you feel confident that you're on your own. But actually you're not." This creates a kind of creeping anxiety; you don't know what social mode you should be in. But with Resolve, "people can see each other, or can feel each other. You know

"More and more, people don't need to come to their offices to work, they can work anywhere," Birsel says. "They come to belong and to be part of a community."



Taking the cube out of the cubicle: 120° angles create workstations that are far more open and welcoming than their 90° counterparts.



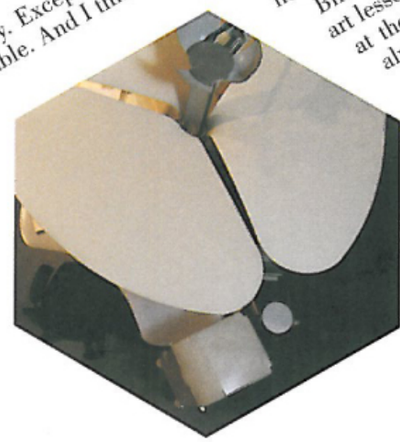
The six basic Resolve workstation constellations

"We worked on this for about three months," Birsel says of an earlier project. "And at the end of that time Herman Miller said, 'Thank you very much, but . . .' It was quite a blow to me. I was like, man, I had my one chance with Herman Miller and I blew it!"

you have a shadow working in the next station, you are aware of whether you're alone or in the company of other people."

It's also important to Birsel that the system allows for variety. "With a 90-degree system, you're limited to two, three, or, if you want to completely close someone off, four sides. Here you can do two-sided, three-sided, four-sided, five-sided . . . what we call constellations." And the various poles and canopies can be configured at different heights, allowing the space to be differentiated. "This is a missing element in most offices today." Birsel points out. "You walk out of the elevator and everything ends at a certain height." A good Resolve space can have the multilayered vertical complexity of a city, or a souk. In fact, I keep finding myself thinking of souks, caravansaries, and courtyard gardens, and I ask Birsel whether she thinks Resolve has anything to do with her Turkish background.

"Hmm, I never thought about it," she says. "No, not really. Except maybe you might say that Turks have a reputation for being very hospitable. And I think that is important for Resolve."



In this regard, Birsel herself certainly lives up to the stereotype; she has the glowing good manners of the perfect hostess. Birsel is about five feet three, with wavy jet-black hair and olive skin. Within a few minutes of meeting me, she already knew all about my family history and where I was planning to spend the summer, while I felt like an ill-mannered klutz for trying to push the conversation towards an interview. It was not until we moved upstairs—Birsel having insisted that I take along a plate of fruit I had been staring at—that I managed to get the hostess to talk about herself.

Birsel grew up in Izmir, a businesslike and cosmopolitan city on Turkey's Aegean coast. It's a city of wide boulevards, heavy traffic, and undistinguished concrete apartment blocks, set in a spectacular valley between craggy mountains—a typical bustling Mediterranean port. Her father is a lawyer, her mother a homemaker; they must have injected their two children with a healthy dose of ambition, because both are now enjoying remarkable success, Ayse as the potential enfant terrible of twenty-first century office design, and her older brother as a TV journalist. "He's kind of like the Larry King of Turkey at this point," says Birsel. "He has a 7 p.m. half-hour talk show. It's very well received."

Birsel suspects that it was her fate to attend Pratt. "I began taking private art lessons in high school, from a friend of my parents who was teaching at the university. He had gotten a master's at Pratt, and he would always talk to me about principles of 3-D abstract design. Of course this stuff was way too advanced for a 14-year-old; I forgot it all immediately." But she did go on to continued on page 166

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study at the newly founded industrial design department of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, and then, on a Fulbright Scholarship, she went to Pratt. "And when I came to Pratt I realized, these are the people my old instructor was talking about. It all fell into place. You know how things create a circle in life? It was only after I arrived here that it was like, hmm, this all makes sense."

For the first few years of Birsel's career, things continued to fall into place. Her 1989 master's thesis, "Water Room," which tried to bring the aristocratic repose of the courtyard fountain into the average contemporary bathroom, was shown at the Nagoya Design Exposition. Bruce Hannah asked her to work with him, and the two produced Knoll's Orchestra suite of desk accessories, an assemblage of curvaceous pencil cups, staplers, tape dispensers, and assorted doodads that can suspend sinuously on a wavy wall mount. Then came the Zoe toilet-seat project, for which Birsel moved to Japan. In the meantime, she had met Leah Caplan, whose father, former *ID* magazine editor Ralph Caplan, was an influential figure at Herman Miller. Soon, Birsel had sold an exploratory project to Herman Miller, and she and Hannah were working on it.

"I put together a proposal called 'Gardens,' asking, could offices be more like gardens? We feel so happy in gardens. How could you have that kind of feeling in an office environment?" says Birsel. "The project was about how to manage cables, and the management of cables is almost like an aqueduct. Wires are your water, your source of vitality in an office. Bruce and I worked on this project for about three months, and at the end of that time Herman Miller said, 'Thank you very much, but . . .' And it was quite a blow to me. I was like, man, I had my one chance with Herman Miller and I blew it!" As it turned out, it wasn't her one chance. There were big things brewing at the company, as Don Goeman, head of new-product development, recounts.

"Late in '96, we were becoming more passionate that it was time to seriously approach a change," says Goeman in fluent, if sincere, corpospeak. "We believed it was time to set a new reference point. By and large, every system solution on the market was still based on the same dominant design that Bob Propst had launched in '68. But in the meantime, architecture had changed, the diversity of the workforce had changed—the technology of the modern office didn't even exist in Propst's day. If we were going to get out of the dominant design box that we had created, and that the whole industry was in, we needed a fresh face."

Once Birsel's face had passed the freshness test, the design process for Resolve got under way. Herman Miller formed a "concept group," teaming Birsel with representatives of the marketing, engineering, applications and planning, and research departments. Don Goeman oversaw the process. "We started out identifying the problems we needed to address. The biggest problem of all was the change in technology. We'd walk around saying, the issue is technology, stupid. And Ayse was emphatic from early on that the solution was a point-based geometry."

The team then began visiting offices of various sizes to get a sense of the issues that companies were confronting. One issue that emerged early on had to do with verticality. "In a desire for openness in environments, organizations were lowering the heights of panels, and work was washing out into a horizontal plane," explains Goeman. "People were starting to get piles of junk in front of them." Birsel formulated the problem as one of vertical display. "The computer is a vertical display element. But we realized that a lot of work is about vertical display, even if it's paper. So we pushed for environments that could allow for other kinds of display to happen vertically—display of work, display of your personality, display of your community, display of the corporation you're working for."

As Birsel began presenting early models, the research department looked for ways to field-test her ideas. But with a system as novel as Resolve, they didn't want to do traditional focus-group research; they knew the initial responses would be confused and negative. "We were not especially interested in listening to what customers had to say, because customers can only report what's happened in the past," says Jim Long, the head of research for the Resolve project. "And our idea was to look to the future." Long and his team made videotapes of Birsel's first models, and conducted hour-long one-on-one interviews with 200 potential users. "We were looking to see if we could convey this idea, if people got it. And what we found was that 20 to 30 percent of people would say, yes, I would buy this. That told us that we were taking enough chances. Anything above that would have sent up red flags; it would have said we were being too imitative."

Once they had produced full-scale prototypes of the system, they began running alpha and beta tests, where users worked in Resolve workstations for up to 10 weeks. At this stage, the feedback did begin to cause some design changes. "Our original idea was to have all the storage be 'soft'—made out of the material backpacks are made out of, with Velcro attachments. It was all going to hang off the infrastructure," explains Long. "But through research, we discovered that people thought it was a cool idea that didn't really work."

As with all big design projects, Resolve has generated a dense thicket of aphorisms, slogans, and three-word alliterative analyses of what's ailing the world—additions, as if any were needed, to the grand dictionary of Corporian. Ayse Birsel proclaims that the office is essentially about "two things: delivery and display." Don Goeman distilled the four major problem statements of the Resolve concept group into something he called "the be-attitudes: be open, be connected, be simple, be sustainable." And so forth. Nevertheless, the publications Herman Miller issues in concert with such projects are often trenchant, even moving depictions of design issues in society. "For most of us," states one Herman Miller publication, "the office is a place where we go to suffer a variety of environmental accidents." Later, it captures a moment of office psychology in almost Jamesian detail:

> For those lucky enough to be granted a . . . private office, the almost automatic thing to do is place the desk so the user faces the door. Almost immediately he notices that if he shuts his door, he is faced with a new kind of insecurity. He does not know what's happening out there, and what's more, affairs may be proceeding without his best interest expressed. This lesson digested, most of us learn to resolutely keep the door open.
>
> The next experience is to notice that since we now have exposure, we are trapped in a game of "continuous idiot salutations." We face the opening, we cannot avoid exposure, we see everybody going by, we may see the same person go by thirty times. Now, do you invest in a recognition act every time someone goes by?

This is a marvelous piece of writing, but there's a catch. It's not from a publication about Resolve. It's from "The Office: A Facility Based on Change," written in 1968 by . . . Robert Propst. This was the book Propst wrote to explain the thinking behind Action Office II.

Admirers of Propst—and they are legion (Ayse Birsel is one of them)—say that Action Office was and remains a brilliant product, addressing the need for flexible, "forgiving" workplace environments in ways no one had ever contemplated before. They say the Action Office concept has been degraded over the years by cheaper, clumsier imitations, and by facilities managers who never understood the goals of the system, and that it's time continued on page 169

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for a fresh approach. Nevertheless, given that office environments in the 1990s are experienced by many workers as being just as oppressive and bleak as the 1950s offices Propst was trying to replace, does all the lofty talk of new principles really matter? Will Ayse Birsel's desire to create workplaces of light, air, movement, and community really mean anything once Resolve hits the office floor?

The first "gamma" test site for a finished Resolve system commenced in mid-July in the newly completed Monsanto chemical corporation regional headquarters in Bombay, India. Joseph Pereira, the architect of Monsanto's new headquarters, also designed the layout of Resolve in the office, and he thinks the system is fantastic.

"We have been pushing Herman Miller to come up with products that are sexy, inexpensive, and internationally transparent, so that things don't look Dilbertish and cube-like," says Pereira. He's particularly impressed by Resolve's ability to adapt to different environments around the world. "We have tied a tremendous amount of Indian culture to the system. We brought only the structural skeleton from Resolve to India, not the textile part; all the textiles were procured locally."

Pereira's ambitions for the system, like everyone's, are pretty high. "What Resolve is going to do more than anything is not to improve productivity—I don't believe furniture does that—but to stimulate the soul, the spirit. It'll help bring more of a balance between that which is objective and mental and that which is of the heart."

And how are the souls who've ascended to this new environment responding so far? I talk to several Monsanto employees who have been working in the new space for a week. "It's very spacious," says Lalita Sajjan, an executive secretary. "There's definitely more community. And it gives you an Indian look. I've never been in an office like that." Sajjan also raves about Resolve's mobile side table, which you can store under your desk and roll out when needed. But "right now I don't find the privacy to be enough. In my workstation, I have fabric just on one side, which makes it very open and quite disturbing, and I see a lot of people moving in and out. I think there will be another curtain thing coming in later, which should make it better."

Edna Castanha, another executive secretary, also thinks the new space is great. "It has many bright colors; you feel very motivated. It gives you a lot of space, and I can look out the window and relax. But there isn't really enough privacy, because you can hear your colleague talk over the phone, and you can see a little of him. You cannot talk very freely to certain people if you know that someone is overhearing your conversation. You want to yell at a coworker because he's not getting something done, and you're keeping your frustration to yourself."

Amita Mistry, an analyst in the accounting department, thinks this is a growing pain. "A lot of people have a traditional mind-set," she says. "In this office, we have a phone booth. If you want to shout at someone, you go into the booth, or go into a conference room. But that takes a little time to get used to."

Joseph Pereira's hopes are undiminished. "This is the first exciting thing to come out of Grand Rapids in 30 years," he says.

I put that statement to Don Goeman at Herman Miller, expecting him to demur, and to say something about the many other fine products that the company has created in its last three decades of resolute attention to the needs of the ever-evolving workplace. Goeman surprises me.

"I agree with that," he says.

Matt Steinglass lives in Amsterdam, where he writes about design, new media, Russia, and music.