

***Cubed*, by Nikil Saval**

Book Review, by Sam Leith, July 3, 2015
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Full Title of Book:

Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery



At the newspaper I worked for in the early 2000s, I remember a moment of great excitement when we moved into new premises. It was the dawning of a new age. Instead of the usual dreary desk arrangement, with time wasted in long conferences and senior executives sequestered in status-enhancing glass boxes, a revolutionary new newsroom would channel the dynamic work-flows of the 24-hour digital future. There was excited talk of "vertical silos" and a lot of nodding.

The editor and his right-hand men were to sit at a "hub" at the heart of the newsroom, with minions of decreasing seniority on "spokes" radiating out from it. Ad hoc micro-conferences would take place right there in the thick of it, and the dynamic ideas proceeding from them would ripple outwards down the spokes and into action. There were "break-out areas", plasma screens, vague instructions to circulate the

hub in a clockwise direction like worshippers at a Tibetan stupa ... Anyway, obviously what happened is that within a few months the senior bods had quietly arranged to have some nice quiet glass boxes reinstalled, and conferences happened in these glass boxes several times a day at appointed hours, just as they had before the revolution.

It's a story that would slot right in to Nikil Saval's absorbing history of office life, which again and again sees utopian schemes – whether born of ideological fervour or modish pseudoscience – crashing against the rocks of reality, with the best intentions leading either to disaster or to a version of the status quo ante.

Take the cubicles that give Saval his title and still stand as the prime metonym for office life. As Saval notes, "in news stories the word 'cubicle' rarely appeared in dignified solitude; instead it was prefaced with some inevitable epithet: 'windowless' or 'dreary', 'cubicle warrens', 'bull pens' or 'infernos'. People laboured in 'cube farms' and were stuck next to each other in six-by-six standard sets known as six-packs. Douglas Coupland's epoch-defining book, *Generation X*, coined the phrase 'veal-fattening pen'."

Yet these cubicles, with their flimsy, fabric-wrapped sort-of-walls, originated with the evangelical work of Robert Propst, a maverick designer in the 1960s who believed that, by designing modular, flexible, "forgiving" open-plan office-spaces, he could liberate "knowledge-workers" to take ownership of their professional destinies (as well as resolving their lumbar issues). Propst hit on those partitions – originally at 120-degree angles – as part of his "Action Office". "His optimism would be his undoing," writes Saval. One of his interviewees continues: "Someone figured out that you didn't need the 120-degree, and it went click. That was a bad day. It took only five seconds for Action Office to turn into a box."

Skyscrapers, too, came into their pomp trailing slogans about form following function – and yet form ended up "following finance": they were designed not to suit one company, but to suit any company, so as to maximise rental yields for their owners.

Saval's work encompasses everything from the sociology of white-collar work and the politics of unionisation to the spread of management pseudoscience and the architectural history of office spaces and furniture design. It sits cheerily between the academic and the journalistic register. He has done some reporting – the obligatory visit to the Googleplex has been paid, and various office-design gurus have been consulted in coffee shops – and some library work, drawing with candid admiration on the researches of the (apparently relatively few) scholars who have navigated this territory before. The range is considerable – there are nice sallies into literature and film, from Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" to Jane Fonda's *9 to 5* – and the statistics well marshalled. Here, too, are nuggets of pub-quiz wisdom: that Upton Sinclair minted the idea of "white-collar work", for instance; or that the concurrent inventions of air-conditioning, the fluorescent lightbulb and the suspended ceiling are to office life what barbed wire and the machine gun were to trench warfare.

Saval's style is nicely spiked with colloquialism. The time-and-motion nut Frederick Taylor, for instance, with his spoon-shaped, championship-winning home-made tennis racquets and improved golf clubs was "something of an odd duck. Less generous observers might have called him a maniac." An early experiment in enlightened management – the Larkin Company's 1916 recreational "masque" for its employees – was adorned with Taylorist slogans about "System", "Order" and "Inefficiency", "potentially making a major bummer out of what was otherwise a company party designed for relaxation". The

skyscraper, he says, has remained more "a symbol of the prowess, even ruthlessness of American-style capitalism than what it equally was: an especially tall collection of boring offices".

Saval has a line in aphoristic character-sketches – Benjamin Franklin ("paragon of pecuniary restraint and bourgeois self-abnegation"); Lewis Mumford ("one of the most widely read and conspicuously ignored writers of his day"); Microsoft ("the idea-stealing giant ... and its nasal-voiced overlord, Bill Gates") – and is jauntily amused by management gobbledygook and Tom-Peters-style motivational absurdities.

That debunking temper serves him well. Saval persuasively argues that, from the rise of the clerking classes in the 19th century and early 20th century onwards, a key ideological feature of white-collar work has been that the worker is individualistic and self-directed; believing he (the exception for she, unfortunately, needs little rehearsal) might be a clerk now, but with patience and application there's nothing to stop him one day sitting where the boss sits. That idea, much more often than not, has turned out to be pure vapour: you fall asleep dreaming the American Dream and you wake up as Dilbert.

Taylorisation, "scientific management" and "human relations", in the first half of the 20th century, turned white-collar workers into pen-pushing factory hands (though factory hands notably resistant to unionisation); in the second half, Reaganomics, and what followed, scythed through the job security of the US's middle-managing middle class. In our own age we've seen the rise of the so-called "precariat": in the US (on which Saval focuses), between a quarter and a third of the workforce is now estimated to be freelance.

That is liberation – of a sort. In his final chapter Saval surveys with qualified approval various new spaces and styles of working that are emerging: small companies sharing space and resources, for instance. Still, there's nothing even in the wacky offices of San Francisco dotcom GitHub (a real company) that strikes such a chord as one of the author's earlier asides: "Certain prison systems, such as that in Texas, responded to overcrowding by redesigning their jails along the lines of an open-plan office, replete with cubicle partitions. Prison inmates employed by the company with the classic 1990s name Unicor ... were set to work manufacturing cubicle walls and occasionally the chairs that people sat in in those cubicles. At night, while others left their cubicles to go back home, some prisoners by contrast left the manufacturing plant to go back to their cubicles."

Yikes. Work in an office? To millions of us, the refrain of that early martyr of the white-collar world, Bartleby, still resonates: "I would prefer not to."