Architecture frames most of our intellectual activities. One particularly important aspect of such “framing” is the spaces devoted to personal work. These spaces are extensively featured in painting. Over the centuries, saints, hermits, and scholars were painted in their studies. The portrait of Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), possibly the most prominent Northern European scholar of his time, painted by Holbein in 1523, is a good example of the “scholar in his study” composition (1). The artist’s studio, on the other hand, evolved from a workshop. A laboratory, I suppose, sits somewhere in between the two.

Particularly interesting are the 15th–16th-century personal spaces known as studiolos (little studios) (2). The studio was a private place for work and contemplation, which merged the elements of a study and a library but was also, interestingly, a personal display reminiscent of the “wall of fame” seen in today’s executive offices. The studiolo related to the Renaissance concept of vita activa and vita contemplativa, where both activity and contemplation were seen as necessary for a good life. Thus, Italian warrior princes surrounded themselves with books and paintings, mixing their politics with humanistic scholarship. Fig. 1 shows the interior of the studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro (1422–1482) at Urbino, a small town about 100 miles south east of Bologna.

Federico da Montefeltro was a leading mercenary soldier (condotiere) in Renaissance Italy. At that time most of the conflicts between the city-states were fought by soldiers of fortune. He served the Sforza family in Milan, the Pope, and the rulers of Naples. He also fought for Florence—although later he was part of the Pazzi conspiracy against the Medici (3). His portrait by Piero della Francesca is in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (4).

He ruled Urbino, becoming the Duke of Urbino in 1474, and made it an intellectual center. Urbino became, for instance, the setting for Baldassare Castiglione’s “Book of the Courtier” published in 1528. The Ducal Palace contained a library that was the largest in Italy outside the Vatican. There was also a scriptorium for copying manuscripts. This is where his studiolo is located. The lower part of the studiolo walls is covered by elaborate illusionistic wood paneling (intarsia) (5). The panels designed by Baccio Pontelli (d. 1492) show objects in the cupboards or on the benches, inlaid according to the requirements of linear perspective. They represent the wide interests of the patron: there are, among other things, books, musical instruments, armor, an astrolabe, and a book press. The upper part of the walls once contained portraits of 28 illustrious men painted by Pedro Berruguete (1450–1504) and Justus of Ghent (active about 1460–1480), of which 14 remain there (5–7). All in all, the contents of the studiolo were a carefully crafted message about the qualities of its patron, directed at selected visitors who were admitted there.

Federico had another studiolo in a palace in Gubbio, about 40 miles south of Urbino, (Gubbio was his and his son Guidobaldo’s birthplace). The Gubbio studiolo has been transferred to the US and reconstructed in its entirety in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (8).

It might seem that there is absolutely nothing in common between a studiolo of a 15th-century Italian duke and contemporary academics’ offices at universities, and yet both are supposed to be spaces that serve to improve intellect and creativity. The proverbial cluttered professorial offices still exist at universities, but the newly built spaces might lean towards those seen on the lower rungs of the corporate ladder. Although open plan offices with partitioned “pens” became a symbol of dehumanized work practices, one now begins to see “office pods” in universities and academic hospitals. The more recent idea is hot-desking, which avoids assigning permanent space to people who, it is assumed, are increasingly nomadic in their work pattern. Minimizing personal work spaces for professionals might also be part of the corporate power game played across all types of institutions.

A nomadic professional with a smartphone and a tablet computer, who depends on the cloud for data storage, may become the norm. On the other hand, assuming that great institutions are built by great individuals, personalized work spaces on campus, like the studiolo of Federico da Montefeltro at Urbino, add to the character and image of an institution.
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