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Integrating Service Design in corporate architecture: a holistic approach to user-centric workspaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how Service Design methodologies can be integrated into corporate architecture to foster human-centered and adaptive environments. By aligning spatial design with service experiences, the study explores how participatory methods and systemic approaches support organizations in rethinking their physical spaces as living components of service ecosystems. The research presents a workshop conducted with employees from a corporate organization, where tools such as personas, journey mapping, and service prototyping were applied to identify user needs and reconfigure the spatial layout. The results reveal that Service Design not only enhances user experience but also enables collaborative innovation within architectural contexts. The discussion connects empirical findings to contemporary theoretical developments in systemic and relational design, suggesting an updated framework that integrates spatial and service dimensions for a more holistic understanding of corporate environments.

Keywords: Co-creation, Corporate Architecture, Spatial and Service Design, Systemic Design, User Experience.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 20th century, design has established itself as a discipline capable of enhancing the functionality, value, and aesthetics of products and systems (Tartas et al., 2016). More recently, to address the challenges of a society increasingly driven by services and information rather than tangible goods, design has focused on satisfying both users and manufacturers (Industrial Designers Society of America, 2012).

Service Design (SD), as a strategic approach, addresses this shift by developing solutions that encompass all aspects of a service. SD tools and methods balance the relationship between users and service providers, enabling the identification of needs and opportunities for new products and services. It also helps in problem-solving through design solutions (Kotler, 2003). This iterative, human-centred approach ensures that the final design is responsive to the needs of all stakeholders, ultimately leading to more effective and innovative solutions.

In response to the shift towards a service-dominant economy, where the focus has moved from products to the experiences that services create, work environments have evolved into dynamic spaces. These environments are no longer confined by rigid furniture and rules but are integrated with internal and external elements such as architecture, signage, and the social

context. They thrive on interpersonal relationships that foster innovation, openness, and flexibility (Zeithaml, Bitner, Gremler, 2014).

In the context of corporate environments, Service Design contributes to the optimisation of workspaces by addressing the physical, emotional, and cognitive needs of users. It enhances the functionality of spaces by considering the holistic interaction between people, processes, and the built environment (Mager, 2004). Service Design aids in creating or improving environments through a holistic and participatory design model (co-creation). Unlike traditional design processes, which may limit user input to the initial consultation phase, SD promotes ongoing collaboration between designers, users, and other stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2014). Although there are well-established tools for the built environment, Service Design's holistic and participatory approach may offer significant contributions.

This study seeks to bridge this conceptual and methodological gap by exploring how Service Design tools and mindsets can inform the practice of corporate architecture. It argues that the inclusion of users in the spatial design process fosters more responsive and empathetic environments while simultaneously strengthening strategic alignment between organizational goals and user needs. The research thus contributes to the ongoing discussion on the evolution of Service Design as a systemic and integrative discipline (van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2022; Vink et al., 2021; Suoheimo et al., 2025), proposing its application as a lens for spatial innovation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Design (SD) emerged in response to the transition towards a service-dominant economy, where the focus has shifted from products to the experiences that services generate. Scholars such as Ezio Manzini, Birgit Mager, and Gillian Hollins have laid the foundation for Service Design as a key tool in improving service delivery in complex, multi-stakeholder environments (Oliveira, 2016). Service Design applies organised sets of methods and tools to diagnose, analyse, and design corporate environments (Moritz, 2005). It balances the relationship between service providers and users, ensuring satisfaction and higher service quality (Unanue et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship has extended these principles toward more complex social and systemic domains. van der Bijl-Brouwer (2022) emphasizes Service Design's potential to foster human relationships that positively enable social and systemic change, while Vink et al. (2021) introduce the notion of service ecosystem design, focusing on the social structures and interdependencies that shape service interactions. Similarly, Suoheimo et al. (2025) and Hay et al. (2023) explore the power dynamics and relational structures within Service Design practice, underscoring the need for designers to navigate diverse stakeholder perspectives and systemic constraints.

SD aims to create services that meet user needs and are desirable for everyday use. It does so by identifying customer, organisational, and market needs to develop flexible solutions that consider the entire service lifecycle, fostering continuous improvement or creating more suitable services (Design Council, 2020). In the context of workspace design, understanding the complexities of employee behaviours and needs is essential for creating effective corporate spaces (Paz et al., 2023).

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Moritz (2005) highlights Service Design as a mediator between organisations and users, providing a framework that reconciles conflicting stakeholder needs. Furthermore, Service Design not only addresses current spatial issues but also anticipates long-term organisational changes, supporting adaptability in corporate architecture.

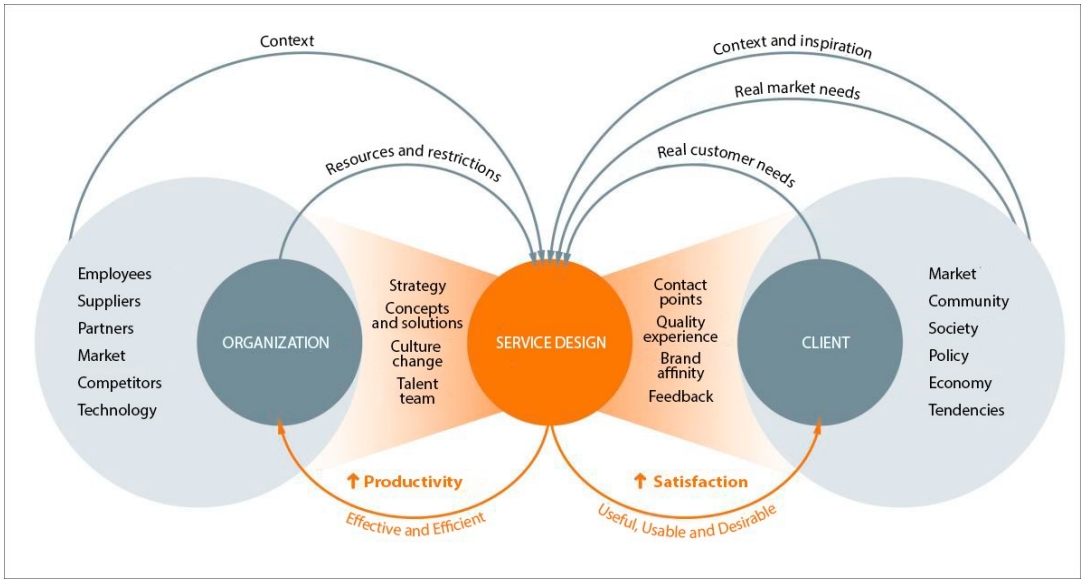

Figure 1. General scheme of the Service Design model (Hinnig; Fialho, 2013).

SD employs dynamic approaches and processes that align with its six core principles: human-centeredness, iterative, Co-creative, sequential, real and holistic.

These principles encourage a collaborative understanding of stakeholders' desires and needs, leading to insights and innovative ideas. They involve strategic thinking, guiding projects through planning, defining, reviewing, analysing, and selecting concepts to deliver optimal results and uncover future possibilities. The first principle, human-centeredness, connects directly to empathy in design, which Gallego and Calderón-Hernández (2023) define as *relational capital*—the trust and collaborative spirit that develops between an organisation and its stakeholders through participative practices.

Service Design offers a holistic approach to organisational transformation by fostering adaptable and resilient workspaces adaptable to changing employee and market needs (Gallego & Calderón-Hernández, 2023). Involving employees in the workspace design process not only drives better spatial outcomes but also increases engagement, reduces resistance to change, and fosters a sense of ownership. According to Vianna et al. (2012), SD tools help users by introducing services better suited to their needs, while also helping organisations to identify weaknesses and opportunities, improving planning around offer and demand. By combining user experience and skills, these tools create the necessary conditions to identify problems and solutions.

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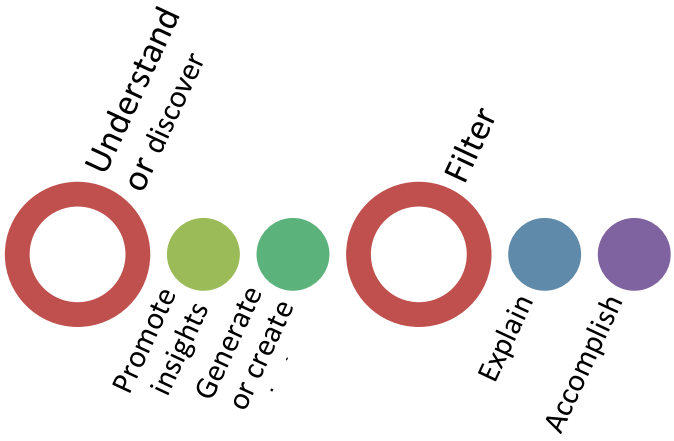

Figure 2. Scheme of Service Design categories.

For organisations, SD tools break down barriers imposed by traditional models by promoting engagement and productivity. However, without addressing corporate power hierarchies, service design efforts—such as the creation of collaborative workspaces—are limited. The impact of employee interactions, organisational culture, and leadership on workspace design is a critical element to consider (Hay et al., 2023). Furthermore, Service Design tools support sustainable and inclusive production processes, benefiting society as a whole. Properly designed corporate environments may contribute to productivity and quality of life, while poorly designed environments lead to stress, anxiety, and depression (United Nations, 2017). However, Service Design tools are more than consultation guides; they are a resource for designers at any stage and context (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2014).

2. CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTS AND SERVICE SCENARIOS IN THE CONTEXT OF SERVICE DESIGN PRACTICE

Corporate environments have undergone significant transformations, evolving from static and cold spaces to more dynamic, flexible, and human-centred ones. These environments now include the relationships between users, service providers, suppliers, and employees. Bitner (1992) introduced the term *servicescape* to describe how corporate environments may be shaped by these interactions. Her conceptual model incorporated external elements such as architecture and signage, as well as interior elements, such as furniture and temperature (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2014). Today, the physical environment is considered an essential element of a service's *physical evidence*, orchestrating tangible aspects like decoration, layout, temperature, odours, and music.

Through the lens of Service Design, corporate environments can be resources for improving user experiences, developing empathy, and creating solutions that contribute to business success, regardless of a company's size. Moritz (2005) further emphasises the importance of Service Design in corporate workspaces, arguing that it helps create environments that are responsive to the needs of employees, customers, and other users. The result is a space that is not only functional but also engaging and productive. Gallego and Calderón-Hernández (2023) argue that those corporate environments that value *relational capital* foresee long-term benefits in employee productivity, satisfaction, and innovation.

Implementing a SD approach introduces a new organisational culture by involving employees and managers, breaking down traditional structures, processes, and values. Stickdorn *et al.* (2020) emphasise the importance of including users in problem-solving, as this highlights the

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connection between architecture and Service Design. Research presented at the Service Design and Innovation Conference (ServDes, 2018) underscored that space plays a crucial role in enhancing the value of services, as it creates a complex blend of memory, imagination, and sensory experiences (Fassi, Galluzzo, & Marlow, 2018). Also, spaces have the potential to stimulate the senses and remain embedded in the user's memory and imagination (Pallasmaa, 2011).

Designing physical spaces that are attuned to users' needs and desires represents a competitive strategy for organisations (Neves, 2017), particularly when those spaces are conceived as atmospheres capable of offering rich and varied sensory experiences—an essential yet often overlooked dimension of Service Design. These ephemeral and intangible qualities permeate the built environment, creating focal points of meaning for users (Wigley, 1998). As Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue, crafting such immersive experiences entails the intentional orchestration of stimuli—including aromas, tastes, sounds, and textures—to produce engaging and memorable interactions. While not every project can prioritise user experience, the strategic potential of experiential design remains significant. Geetsom (2018) reinforces that well-designed corporate environments can deepen user relationships, provided they also maintain economic viability. Fuente (2014) highlights a paradigmatic transition in corporate design: from expecting users to adapt to rigid spaces to developing spaces that dynamically respond to the needs of users. This evolution demands that organisations acknowledge the subjectivity embedded in service encounters, which often carry emotional significance (Pinheiro, 2015). In this context, empathy-driven approaches become essential to navigating the complexity of corporate environments, enabling genuinely human-centred and adaptive design responses.

Although foundational Service Design frameworks established by Stickdorn and Schneider (2014) remain highly influential, recent research highlights an evolution toward systemic and relational approaches that emphasise the social and organisational contexts of services. Van der Bijl-Brouwer (2022) advances this perspective by framing Service Design as a relational practice aimed at fostering positive social systemic change through human-centric interactions. Similarly, Vink, Koskela-Huotari, Tronvoll, Edvardsson, and Wetter-Edman (2021) propose a comprehensive model of service ecosystem design that integrates multiple stakeholders and social structures as design materials, underscoring the complexity of modern service environments.

Pedagogical insights from Ding et al. (2023), Salinas (2023), and Oygur Ilhan (2023) further demonstrate the growing importance of embedding Service Design education within innovation and product development disciplines, suggesting a need for adaptive, collaborative learning frameworks. Moreover, the notion of Systemic Service Design (Suoheimo, Jones, Lee, & Sevaldson, 2025) situates the discipline within a holistic context that balances integration, holism, and environmental specificity, broadening the scope beyond conventional touchpoint optimisation.

These contemporary contributions reveal a maturing field that requires dynamic methodologies and critical perspectives, embracing both tangible and intangible facets of services, and calling for Service Design to engage with power relations, hierarchies, and systemic complexities (Hay et al., 2023). Hence, empathy-driven and systemic approaches are vital to navigating the complexities of corporate environments and fostering genuinely human-centered design. Accordingly, this study incorporates these updated frameworks to

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critically examine and extend Service Design principles within the context of corporate architecture.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review with a practical experiment conducted through a workshop at CRITT/UFJF_ an institutional body that collaborates with entrepreneurs and businesses, providing advisory services for the development of novel products, services, solutions, and innovative technologies across diverse sectors, thereby functioning as a catalyst for regional economic development (Unanue, 2018).

The workshop aimed to identify specific spatial challenges within its environment and to evaluate the potential of Service Design as a strategic approach to address these problems. The insights gathered informed the recommendations presented in the results and discussion sections.

The workshop was deliberately structured to align with established Service Design methodologies, incorporating the iterative and participatory principles fundamental to the discipline. It was organised into three interconnected phases—Theoretical (problem framing and empathy-building), Practical (ideation and co-creation), and Evaluation (reflection and prioritisation)—enabling continuous feedback loops and fostering stakeholder collaboration.

This workshop simulated real-world Service Design processes, replicating its exploratory, generative, and evaluative stages critical to human-centred innovation. Tools like Personas and Journey Mapping fostered empathy and a comprehensive analysis of service interactions within the workspace, while strategic alignment matrices ensured proposed solutions corresponded to organisational goals.

Beyond methodological replication, the workshop's innovative contribution lies in explicitly applying Service Design within the often-underexplored domain of corporate architecture, bridging spatial design with service innovation. This approach highlights how Service Design transcends traditional consultation models by integrating user insights and systemic thinking into architectural practice, thereby enriching both service quality and environmental experience.

The literature review underscored the maturity of Service Design as a discipline. However, it revealed a gap in its spatial dimensions, particularly regarding corporate environments. This gap demands greater observation and investigation by Service Designers into user interactions within these spaces, as such understanding is essential for transforming ideas into effective services. From an architectural perspective, embedding user-centric Service Design throughout the service design process is a valuable asset for creating meaningful value and new relationships between people and organisations.

Coordinated by Prof. Mariane Unanue (FAU/UFJF) and with the participation of members of CRITT's Entrepreneurship Sector personnel, the workshop proved valuable for disseminating Service Design concepts, particularly among participants from sectors such as entrepreneurship and innovation, communication, training, technology-based incubators, finance, and quality. The participants reflected on how workspace design impacts both external user satisfaction and employee development.

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Figure 3. Photos of the theoretical part of the workshop.

The methodology accounted for all stages of the research process — before, during, and after the workshop. For instance, the research team's journey began with the planning and organisation of the workshop, after the project was submitted to the university's Ethics Committee. Later, an invitation was made to CRITT sectors while the research team prepared the materials to be used during the workshop activities. At this stage, the main touch points were the telephone, the internet and the members of the research group, ethics council and CRITT. During the activity, the first touch point was the reception desk at the entrance to the conference room, where the accreditation took place and they received their identification (badge and group division), also including the space itself, furniture, folders, pens and boards as relevant touch points.

The use of colour as a methodological resource—yellow, pink, green, and orange—not only divided participants into four groups but also aimed to evoke emotions such as energy, joy, creativity, balance, and optimism (Pedrosa, 2014).

Figure 4. Iteractive design phases and tools used at the practical phase of the workshop.

Participants employed a diverse set of Service Design tools (Fig.4) to engage deeply with the workspace challenges. User Brainstorming, Personas, and User Journey Mapping facilitated a profound understanding of user needs and preferences. Particularly, User Journey Mapping illuminated how employees and visitors navigate the CRITT workspace, helping to identify "pain points." Tools such as the Strategic Challenge and Alignment Matrix ensured the alignment of solutions with organisational objectives. The Wall of Possibilities and Prioritisation Map supported idea generation and selection. Finally, refinement tools like Storyboarding allowed participants to visualise and iterate on their concepts effectively.

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3.1. Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through a combination of qualitative methods, including participant observation, group discussions, and a post-workshop questionnaire. These methods provided a rich understanding of the participants' experiences and allowed the research team to identify common themes and challenges related to this specific corporate workspace.

The data collected from the workshop were analysed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying patterns and themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed the research team to identify key spatial and organisational issues within the CRITT workspace and explore how Service Design could address these challenges.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Proposed Solutions Identifying Spatial Problems

By employing a suite of Service Design tools_Personas, User Journey Mapping, Brainstorming, Strategic Challenge Matrix, Wall of Possibilities, and Storyboard_the participants navigated through iterative phases of exploration, ideation, and evaluation that mirror the canonical Service Design process. The workshop yielded significant insights into spatial and organisational challenges within the corporate environment at CRITT. Key issues included poor communication, lack of interdepartmental integration, and limited spatial flexibility. These were directly linked to the physical configuration and underutilization of collaborative spaces.

Challenges were particularly evident in the reception area, which is the first touchpoint that, in the view of the participants, concentrates most of the problems listed in Table 1. One of these issues is related to the nonexistence of any corporate information in the reception space to identify the kinds of available services provided by that organisation. This problem could have been identified in advance and solved by architecture professionals if users had participated in the ideation phase of the building renovation project, carried out recently (previous to the workshop).

Table 1: Summary of the groups' work.

Group	Problem	Contact Point	Strategic Challenge	Refining
1	Reduce bureaucracy, computerise and simplify the process.	Reception	How to respond assertively and in less time?	Simplified service process and adequate knowledge management.
2	Internal and external communication.	Reception	How to improve communication with users at the reception?	General training.
3	A room with privacy.	Reception	How to improve service?	Satisfaction survey to evaluate the service space.
4	The other sectors do not understand the sector's processes.	Communication room.	How to solve the problem of leadership?	Improve management through qualified professionals.

Figure 6. Partial results of the practical phase of the workshop.

4.2. Proposed Solutions

The workshop outcomes demonstrated that, although involving users in the design process may slightly increase the costs of commercial architectural projects, this approach proves highly valuable in improving or creating services. Integrating the user perspective, with space as both an object of reflection and a support tool for decision-making, efficiently delivers benefits to users and service providers alike.

The practical application demonstrated that involving users throughout these phases generates design solutions that are both functionally effective and experientially meaningful. When Service Design tools and methods are employed, they facilitate collaboration and information exchange among diverse stakeholders with varied skills and interests.

For instance, recommendations such as introducing digitally interactive reception areas and creating flexible multi-use spaces highlight how Service Design principles—human-centeredness, co-creation, and iterative development—are operationalised in architectural contexts. To address interdepartmental communication challenges, participants proposed creating shared collaborative spaces. These areas would encourage informal interactions through flexible seating arrangements and writable surfaces, stimulating brainstorming and idea-sharing among employees from various sectors.

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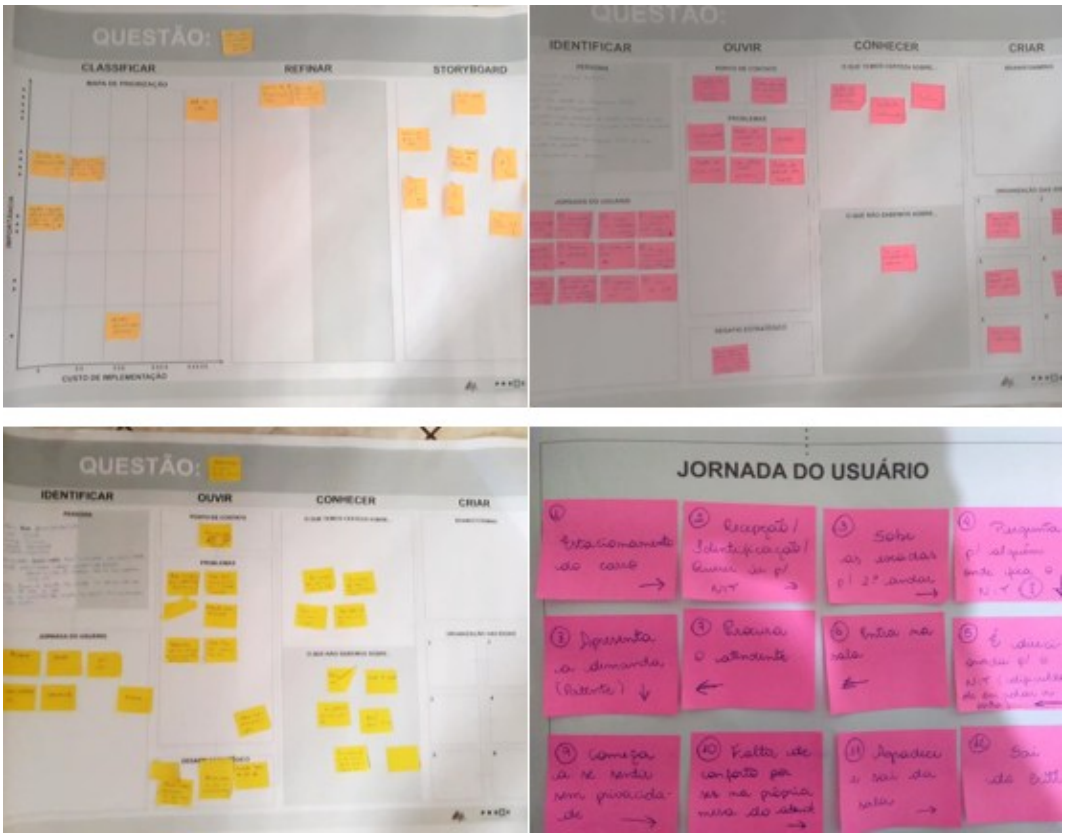

Figure 7. Table with the final boards of the groups.

Specifically, the workshop's theoretical phase sensitised participants to Service Design principles, fostering problem framing and stakeholder empathy. The practical phase activated ideation and co-creation, enabling participants to visualise and prototype spatial solutions responsive to their work needs. Finally, the evaluation phase encouraged reflection, feedback, and prioritisation, ensuring alignment with both user experience and organisational objectives.

Collectively, these outcomes affirm that spatial design benefits immensely from Service Design's holistic methodology, enabling workspaces that are adaptable, inclusive, and integrated with organisational dynamics.

Figure 8. Photos of the current XXXX reception.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1. The Role of Service Design in Corporate Architecture

Physical space has a relevant impact on users' perception of the quality of the services provided, as the quality of the experience concerning the services provided by the corporations can improve a lot when this place is easy to use, safe and, in some way, pleasant. Therefore, observing these aspects can improve the performance of employees by allowing them to focus their attention on the development of activities and understanding that they are part of a corporate environment that is concerned with their well-being.

Even though there are already well-structured design processes in architectural design, it is still a challenge to include the user in these plans. What is noticed is that even though there are efforts for this to happen, it is almost always focused on the earlier stages of the design process, where the user's point of view and their spatial experience are considered solely in the consultation part of the design process.

In the view of Tzortzopoulos and Sexton (2007), few design processes are focused on human factors and most fail to manage and transfer their concerns to the design practice. The term “user” is quite complex and not only involves the consideration of people's desires and needs, but it also means expanding their role in the design process, to the point that it may be constituted as a stakeholder.

Sennet (2018, p.274) suggests that better design results come from "co-design, not consultation". Co-design translates to having a real involvement of both the users and the trained professionals to create design solutions. Service Design practices and tools consider as many stakeholders as possible to add multiple visions to the entire design process. While traditional architectural design focuses primarily on the physical environment, Service Design also considers the social and operational systems that define how the space is used.

During the workshop, participants actively utilised Service Design tools—such as personas, user journey mapping, and brainstorming—to collaboratively surface key spatial and organisational challenges. The process led to practical outcomes: for instance, the decision to redesign the reception area to enhance user navigation and well-being; prototyping of flexible, shared spaces aimed at supporting team integration; and the development of digital solutions to streamline communication workflows.

Furthermore, the application of emotional mapping and co-creation techniques illuminated both the explicit and nuanced needs of users. This approach supported the creation of environments intentionally structured to encourage collaboration, foster inclusion, and promote organisational alignment.

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Figure 9. Panorama photos of the group presentation during the workshop.

5.2. Challenges and Opportunities

The workshop demonstrated the significant potential of Service Design in corporate architecture, yet it also revealed several challenges inherent to its participatory approach. A primary difficulty lay in coordinating input from multiple stakeholders, as gathering and synthesising diverse feedback demands substantial time and resources. Furthermore, accommodating too many conflicting needs risks creating overly complex design solutions.

Building on these findings, we propose an adapted Service Design model tailored specifically for corporate architecture. This model expands upon the traditional framework by explicitly integrating systemic social factors and organisational power dynamics. While the original model by Hinnig and Fialho (2013) emphasises user-centred, iterative design, it underrepresents the impact of intra-organisational relationships and environmental adaptability. Our revised model incorporates a multi-layered perspective where:

- Stakeholder diversity and power relations are treated as active “materials” shaping design decisions.
- Spatial adaptability is elevated as a core design principle alongside human centricity.
- Cross-functional collaboration is embedded throughout every phase, promoting genuine co-creation rather than mere consultation.

This enriched framework aligns with contemporary systemic Service Design discourse (Suoheimo et al., 2025) and draws from empirical insights gathered during the workshop. These insights identified communication silos and rigid spatial layouts as critical barriers to effective service ecosystems within corporate environments. By foregrounding these dimensions, the model offers a nuanced blueprint for designers seeking to balance user experience with complex organisational realities.

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In this context, Service Design tools and methods prove invaluable for corporate spaces by ensuring user centrality throughout all design stages—beginning in the earliest phases. However, successful application demands greater rigour from designers in coordinating multidisciplinary stakeholders and communicating via accessible, inclusive language, ensuring all participants can understand and contribute meaningfully to the architectural project.

Ultimately, this approach reframes the design process and service delivery context as intentional co-creation endeavours, fostering built environments designed collaboratively with users from inception through completion. This shift recognises users not merely as recipients but as active collaborators throughout both the architectural and service design journey.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The integration of Service Design into corporate architecture presents substantial benefits for organisations aiming to create user-centred, adaptable workspaces. By actively involving users throughout the design process and employing iterative design methods, Service Design ensures that the resulting environments are more functional, flexible, and responsive to the diverse needs of all stakeholders. This approach not only enhances the physical workspace but also enriches the overall experience of those working within it.

The workshop highlighted how Service Design processes can effectively address corporate challenges by fostering environments that prioritise user-focused experiences and promote a positive corporate atmosphere. Engaging stakeholders directly in problem-solving supports a richer exploration of services and integrates multiple sensory dimensions and touchpoints into the design.

Early user involvement allows Service Design to capture insights that transcend traditional architectural expertise, leading to solutions that are more holistic and inclusive. The findings of this study indicate that Service Design has strong potential to overcome common issues in modern corporate environments, such as communication barriers, rigid spatial layouts, and limited user engagement.

By leveraging tools like journey mapping, personas, and touchpoint analysis, architects and spatial designers can develop workspaces that foster collaboration, stimulate innovation, and support employee well-being.

Looking ahead, future research should deepen the exploration of Service Design applications across diverse corporate contexts, focusing on refining methods and tools for creating truly user-centred workspaces. Additionally, more empirical studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of Service Design on workplace productivity, employee satisfaction, and organisational performance.

For architects and spatial designers, this study underscores the importance of adopting a user-centred mindset in workspace design. By integrating Service Design principles and practices, practitioners can craft environments that not only fulfil functional organisational requirements but also significantly enhance the quality of the workplace experience.

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