

# WHAT'S IN A SQUARE FOOT?

A square foot (*sq/ft*) is a simple unit of measure to understand; one foot by one foot, 144 square inches.

Anywhere Imperial measure is used the size does not change. Even in Canada where we have long since switched over to metric, the *sq/ft* remains a ubiquitous expression. Space of all kinds are measured in *sq/ft*, with many purchase, rental, maintenance and service costs calculated using aggregate totals, in whole or in part. A *sq/ft* is easy to visualize, easily measured and straightforward to communicate.

However, the simplicity of it all is complex when one introduces people into the equation. As a minimum, a person standing requires 4 *sq/ft*, and sitting, 6 *sq/ft*. But the actual number of *sq/ft* required to be comfortable depends on the activity. For example, airplane and theatre seat allocations are around 6 *sq/ft* or less but that same space at a restaurant would feel very tight indeed (*except in Paris*). At a house party 12 *sq/ft* can be comfortable but at a business function, 16 *sq/ft* is typically too little space. When shopping, 36 *sq/ft* is like being at the mall on the busiest shopping day of the year.

Part of this perceptual discrepancy is 'personal' space, which varies by culture, but most of the variable is a function of focus. We can comfortably be cheek by jowl watching a concert but we need a significant amount of circulation space at a cocktail party to conversationally bob and weave, and move around the room freely. Anything less feels crowded and unpleasant.

It's not that people cannot tolerate others who pass through their (*variable*) space requirement, or that we need several feet between us and the people with whom we are talking. It is more a function of feeling in control of the situation, not being trapped and unable to move should one choose.

Ironically, too much space also has a negative effect. We have all been at gatherings, business or social, where the event failed to ignite because there were not enough people to comfortably populate the space. It is like the energy potential of the occasion was not sufficiently strong to bridge the gaps between those attending.

As commercial space planners, all of these considerations are of tremendous importance. They are, as they say, the 'fundamentals'. They are the starting point for everything that follows. In a very real but subtle way they make the difference between a very successful floor plan and one that does not fully meet the expectations of those using the space.

In fact, so fundamental are the 'fundamentals', that over the years MDA has developed its own catalog of minimum square footage allocations; building blocks if you will, to ensure that each area has the space needed to support and enhance the intended purpose. Without attention to this elemental detail, premises can be attractive without being flexible or fully functional.

*In terms of total space, BOMA International has set the standard for measuring for almost 100 years. Having acknowledgment of BOMA standards in a lease is never a bad practice.*



## Allocations Examples

Person Sitting	Basic Space	Circulation Factor	Min. Sq/Ft
Workstation	36	30%	47 sq/ft
Collaboration	24	25%	30 sq/ft
Meeting Room	24	25%	30 sq/ft
Boardroom	28	35%	38 sq/ft
Reception	28	40%	39 sq/ft
Theatre Style	6	30%	8 sq/ft

Person Standing	Basic Space	Circulation Factor	Min. Sq/Ft
Copy Room	12	25%	15 sq/ft
Business Gathering	18	25%	25 sq/ft
Social Gathering	16	25%	20 sq/ft

The allocations cannot be expressed as absolutes. For example, two or more contiguous seating area allocations may be able to share a percentage of space or the temporary use of a circulation factor. Further, an occasional 'specific' use may skew a general allocation higher, despite the fact that the need or purpose is infrequent.

In the final analysis, space requirements are driven more by human perception than physical necessity. People can easily be wedged into smaller and smaller spaces in an effort to reduce overhead but such choices are often shortsighted. The savings are almost invariably out-paced by reductions in productivity and the high cost of churn.



McTernan Design Associates  
2515 Bathurst Street Suite 101  
Toronto ON M6B 2Z1  
416.386.0045  
mcternandesign.com