

Rethink: Working miracles, the office design revolution – The RIBA Journal

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From community hubs for homeworkers to the demise of the high-rise office, the first in a series on post-pandemic design asks what our future workspaces might look like.

Will the office ever be the same again? As preparations begin for a loosening of some [Coronavirus](#) lockdown measures, it is clear that the workplace will have to adapt fast to deliver a safe environment that staff can trust.

In the short-term, this means enabling physical distancing in the office and a hybrid office/working-from-home combination. But what longer-term mark will Covid-19 leave on how we design and organise our offices? If many of us can work from home instead, how can designers make the communal workplace a more compelling and effective setting? What do we still need it for?

The office is far from dead, but instead will evolve in response, according to Neil Pennell, head of design innovation and property solutions at [Landsec](#) and chair of the [British Council for Offices](#) (BCO) Technical Affairs Committee.

‘We are social beings. We’re all missing the office. A lot of people work off that spark that you get with human contact,’ he says, anticipating that offices will be planned with the ability to shift to modes that respond to future virus flare-ups.

He has edited [Thoughts on Office Design and Operation After Covid-19](#), a BCO Briefing Note that looks at issues such as decreased density, reception and lift protocols, management of meeting rooms, kitchenettes and toilets, greater use of touch-free technology, safe ventilation and other building services, and how to ensure increased hygiene measures.

In the short term, visible measures that provide reassurance to returning office workers are important. In the planning of new offices, Pennell also expects more generous reception and lobby areas - with safe circulation a particular issue in taller buildings - as well as greater use of materials with more virus resistance and a deeper - rather than a ‘tick-box’ - emphasis on wellness in the workplace.

‘It’s a sad driver, but this is a fantastic opportunity for the design industry,’ he says. ‘This will spur some interesting debate and dialogue. Architects and engineers will have to work closer than they ever have before.’

Below, four architects with expertise in this sector share their views on the post-Covid office.

Alexi Marmot, professor of facility and environment management, director of the Global Centre for Learning Environments in UCL’s Bartlett Real Estate Institute and founding director of [AMA Alexi Marmot Associates](#)

In the UK, about 60 per cent of jobs are done in offices. Considering the future office after Covid-19 demands deep consideration. And we need to ensure that sustainability is also incorporated within solutions.

There are two key issues: how to manage the existing office stock; and how might the office change in the future. We do know that office buildings will have to be very flexible. Those that allow for flexibility will be the winners.

In the short term, social distancing would demand almost three times as much space as current norms to safely accommodate office workers. As this is impossible to deliver quickly, remote working will continue to be part of the short-term solution. Fewer people will go into the office every day. Some will become permanent remote workers, mostly working online from their homes. Others will split their work between home and office.

To accommodate everyone, we need to make better use of existing office space through intelligent ways of using buildings over time. That means scheduling work in the office so that people come in only when they really need direct physical access to certain people or technology. It may mean two shifts of work in the office - some starting early morning, others starting and ending later - or using offices over six or seven days a week, not just five. It will certainly require scheduling, management and control of entry and egress times. Fortunately, we can draw on over three decades of positive experience of remote work, telework, flexible work and smart work.

In the short term, there will remain an inevitable reluctance for people to squeeze back on to crowded public transport for commuting. There is a danger that the private car might re-emerge as the preferred way of commuting and that low-density office parks might again be perceived as especially attractive. While appealing for reasons of individual health, such trends would be a dangerous backward step in terms of planetary health and sustainability.

In future, tall buildings - buildings that demand users squeeze into lifts - may become less desirable. New office buildings may tend towards lower rise so people can avoid lifts and use stairs (while observing social distancing), increasing their physical activity. Two health benefits: lower chance of transmitting the virus and less obesity by increased physical activity.

Office workers, along with architects, developers, planners and occupiers, will behave cautiously. It won't be business as usual for some time.

Helen Berresford, partner and head of ID:SR, [Sheppard Robson](#)

There are definitely two strands: the absolutely practical aspect of getting people back to work with physical distancing; and the longer term impact on office design. For both, the culture of the organisation will be hugely important in holding everything together.

Offices will be different in the short term as they deal with issues around health and safety and cleanliness. We are working with clients on the physical effects of running an office with two-metre distancing. There are several aspects: how you prepare the building overall; and how you prepare the workplace, including how you facilitate access and security safely. The two-metre seating distancing is one key aspect. Then there's the flow of the building - the circulation and access routes to desks and tea points. This further reduces occupancy. Cleanliness and facilities management will be more important than ever - these are the front-line.

Collaboration and drop-in spaces in offices will not be open to normal use in the first wave of returns to work, but as soon as it's safe to open these up, there will be a real desire to use them. In the meantime these, and meeting rooms, will be used for physically distanced working - meetings will still have to take place digitally for the most part even if people are in the same office.

Longer term, there's an opportunity for betterment. There is the chance to press the restart button on how people occupy and respect their office environment. It will be everyone's job to help keep things clean and respect facilities management protocols that previously may not have been heard.

The whole civic urbanity of offices will not go away - it will definitely return even though it's now recognised that we can work in a variety of remote locations. There will be a greater convergence of work/life/play - we can't forget what we've seen on those Zoom calls. Those businesses that can manage this humanity and enable it in their organisations will be those that adapt the best.

There is a hugely rich vein of diversity that we can draw on to help us rebuild our offices of the future. It is exciting. If there can be a silver lining, it's that companies will have to care and really think hard about their most precious resource - the people who occupy their buildings.

Nicola Gillen, EMEA head of Total Workplace at real estate group [Cushman & Wakefield](#) and author of [Future Office: Next-generation workplace design](#)

The impact of Covid-19 on how and where we will work has at least two main phases: pre-vaccine and post-vaccine.

In the short term, once restrictions begin to lift, there will be a combination of working from home and in the office. Choice and flexibility will be key. We are currently working with organisations to help them understand which roles might work best from home and to consider the whole journey from home to work, as well as thinking more strategically long term.

At Cushman & Wakefield, we've created the 6 Feet Office concept for social distancing in the workplace, which includes analysis of the existing workplace for virus safety, advice on safe workstations and circulation and rules of conduct. We have produced a 'how-to' guide for returning to the workplace, which we've made freely available on our website, based on our learnings from moving companies back into the work environment in Asia. We are also working with Delos and Mayo Clinic on the Well Living Lab, a research project to help prevent the spread of air and surface viral transmission in offices.

In many companies, however, Covid-19 will be the catalyst for a more long-term and fundamental questioning of why we should go to work in an office rather than simply doing so as a default setting. This is an opportunity to change that default and question all the money, time, carbon and person energy that we spend commuting to work.

There are a lot of conversations going on about whether there will be fewer offices - and maybe there will be. Either way, offices will definitely be different.

Now that we've all done the enforced working-from-home experiment, it doesn't make sense for every employee to travel long distances just to sit at individual desks not talking. Instead, the office will be based more around community than control. And, as we spend more time working virtually, the demand for better quality physical environments and experiences will increase.

Face-to-face communication is one of the richest forms of communication and in the new office I think it may become more prized and valued than it was before.

Desks in rows will be replaced by other spaces related to collaborative working and culture building, such as areas for training, induction, collaborative work, social events, networking and conferences. These are the sorts of activities that suit offices best. Also, office space will become more varied with fewer desks and many more spaces to meet, eat, exercise and unwind.

Matthew Blain, regional leader in the UK and Europe at [Hassell](#)

Covid-19 will challenge designers to think harder. It will force us to innovate and force the real estate industry to look at how it markets and leases buildings.

We have seen a range of trends towards more agile workplaces over the past five or so years, but the biggest blockage to working in different ways has always come from employers regarding security of information and the ability of staff to engage effectively with each other. A big part of that is trust. Now that these blockages have been diluted by enforced working from home, Covid-19 will be the driver that changes how offices will work in the future.

We have clients who are asking questions about how, in the short term, they can get back to using their current space through simple measures, such as spacing, in combination with shift work and some working from home. As well as cleaning, the big challenge is how you get people into buildings and through lift lobbies. And we have clients who were in the process of looking for new spaces in the centre of London and are now questioning the nature of the space they will need.

The office will always be important as a place where people come together to work when they need to. But, rather than being a big, centralised office of several thousand people in the middle of London, there might instead be a hub for about 500 and a network of smaller office ‘spokes’ where teams can go to work together. This might mean that these offices disperse to more high-street and suburban locations, maybe even to some former retail spaces, which could be repurposed.

Office space will be increasingly programmed. Desks won’t disappear in offices, but the proportion of desk space will decrease significantly and, instead, these spaces will become agile, collaborative work areas that are programmed for use by different teams. There will be less demand for workspace for process workers, such as those who input data or do call-centre work. Instead, these employees may work from home, but will still need access to a team-building space.

It won’t be a landslide change overnight. People are tied to long leases. But, as those leases come up, the experience of Covid-19 will challenge how offices work. Before, people were naturally afraid of change. Now that the working-from-home blockage has gone, every aspect of the centralised office will be up for review and, as architects and designers, we need to be at the heart of that conversation.