

It seems we love the office after all

Would more office time improve our wellbeing? How do workplace environments need to update post-pandemic? Why are flexible fitouts and transparent spaces important? Our webinar investigates

'Today my water cooler moment is a chat with my neighbour downstairs or the opportunity to put the washing on,' notes webinar chair Jan Carlos Kucharek, opening RIBA's PiP's Office and Workplace Design webinar. Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Administration building, Foster + Partners' Hongkong and Shanghai Bank Headquarters and Richard Rogers' Lloyds' Building each reinvented the way we conceive of the office environment; none could have imagined the post-pandemic remote, home-based scenarios which resemble more of a 'cottage industry,' Kucharek says. Technology has allowed us to transcend the confines of location, but where to from here? In the metaverse, Kucharek muses, 'will we visit our offices again, as avatars moving through our virtual working lives?'

With that futuristic thought in mind, the first speakers are Nicola Gillen, head of total workplace EMEA, and Sophie Schuller, head of applied research EMEA consulting – both based at Cushman & Wakefield's Netherlands office – drawing lessons from their book, *Reworking the Workplace: Connecting people, purpose and place* (RIBA Books).

In it they investigate the impact of the pandemic on work culture and community, hybrid working and built environment consequences. They also explore possible outcomes for the evolution of cities, physical and virtual work models for the future and how workplace architecture interfaces with the wellbeing of individuals and the environment. The book showcases 50 case-studies, some of which are touched on here (such as Brent Cross Town project play, and the WELL-surpassing Royal College of Physicians Headquarters, Liverpool) promoting work, wellbeing and community.

The integration between our virtual and physical worlds is shifting, says Schuller, with VR helping to recreate communities and face-to-face interactions in immersive online settings. Yet what suffers most in a remote working model is 'serendipity' and the maintenance of a connection to place. Recent research from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention states that our 'physical



and social environments account for over 50% of our sense of wellbeing' says Gillen. So the book encourages conversations about what architecture can do to enhance community, entrepreneurship and regeneration to help our working lives evolve positively and our workplaces to serve the community.

In office settings, acoustic comfort is a crucial for mental and physical wellbeing. And with hybrid working, offices need acoustically-optimised spaces that aid good quality video calls and encourage face to face



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collaboration – a reason why employees now visit the office. Oscar Acoustics managing director Ben Hancock says a study by global architecture firm Gensler found that UK employees are spending less than half their working week in the office, yet believe individual and team productivity would be improved if they were there more. Gensler's own London office used Oscar Acoustics' spray-applied SonaSpray (made from recycled paper and plant based fibres) was used to enhance the workplace experience. With many companies wishing to entice their workforce back to the office, better acoustic conditions should feature as one of many environmental improvements to enhance wellbeing, productivity and satisfaction.

Acoustic barriers are a crucial part of the next project with its unprecedented mix of uses. Ross Heffernan, senior associate at Faulkner Browns, discusses the £42m Sunderland City Hall, a major civic component of the city's regeneration. It comprises workplaces for council employees and private tenants, as well as community outreach facilities. Materials and finishes on the transparent building were inspired by existing buildings in the vicinity, such as the magistrates court which has a sandstone like appearance.

The publicly accessible atrium contains an oxide red steel staircase inspired by Sunderland's industrial history, locally sourced and fabricated and with accessibility consultancy from Proudlock Associates. The flexible space has been embraced for many purposes, including children's activities and yoga, in a building also occupied by the Coroners court and the DWP, 'setting a bar for the public sector workplace' according to the British Council for Offices. Most interestingly, the ground floor debating chamber is now visible from outside, generating initial nervousness from councillors. This, says Heffernan, has made 'the transparency of the democratic processes inside clearly visible' – a much needed step towards openness and accountability.

In terms of transparency, Emma Green, commercial director of IQ Glass, gives two examples of bespoke external facade glazing: Tontine Street, in Folkestone, Kent – the regeneration of a former nightclub into

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ED REEVE

Above Waugh Thistleton's Orsman Road offices in London, whose hybrid CLT structure is proudly expressed internally. **Opposite** The entrance atrium of Faulkner Browns' Sunderland City Hall, with its red steel oxide staircase linking both different levels and the city with its industrial heritage.

a co-working space with a floating and undulating facade; and The Gem, Manchester – with its faceted facade, curved in plan and elevation. She outlines the complexity of these projects and their technical details, ultimately showcasing the creative potential of glass and how the company collaborates with architects to achieve such designs.

Next, Alistair Ogle, senior associate, Waugh Thistleton Architects – a practice known for its use of engineered timber products – discusses 6 Orsman Road, a flexible timber office on the Regent's Canal. This stepped volume, with views of both the canal and the City, necessitated a lightweight structure; piles over 8m were not allowed due to the presence of Crossrail below. The hybrid structure of CLT and minimal steel is a simple, Meccano like construction. All connections are bolted for future demounting and four floors can be rented out separately to tenants. It took seven weeks to construct the frame with one crane.

Intumescent paint was applied to the exposed steel, and wood has been left exposed in the stairwell. To the south, upper floors are set back with angled balconies to minimise solar gain and lower floors have ribbon windows. To the north, the facade is fully glazed, improving daylight and visual amenity to the canal and the sky.

Internally, floor coverings are linseed oil and cork-based linoleum and clay plaster is used on walls. Work surfaces are constructed from recycled aggregate and upholstery is natural fabric. Some furniture was made

from CLT offcuts. Halfway through the process, the building was acquired by British Land who altered the brief; the flexibility of the structure and materials enabled a new staircase to be cut out of the CLT even after the floorplates had been constructed. A versatile office meeting today's needs.

Lastly, Stephen Roberts, sales director of CMD, introduces Miro, a new dynamic, ergonomic monitor arm. The company integrates technology and electrical products (USB ports, wireless charging, AV equipment and so on) into office furniture and manufactures in the UK. Miro is a steel-tube based cable management system and desk clamp monitor support offering vertical adjustment which outperforms traditional solutions, helping maintain good posture while keeping desk space clear. So no more balancing your monitor on a 1980s product directory... how office life changes. ●

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