

# The future of workspace in London

The most successful commercial buildings are those that consider the ever-changing nature of the workplace from the outset says Peter Barbalov



London is going through a rapid transformation of the way commercial space is being designed, marketed and occupied. The emerging and evolving models of co-working are challenging the established paradigm of CAT A commercial space prevalent in the capital over the last 20 years. Indeed, the shape of London's future workplaces is feeding discussions at every level.

We held a panel debate earlier in the year at the co-working space in our recently completed mixed-use building 'The Eagle' in City Road, whilst the NLA are currently holding an exhibition entitled WRK/LDN at The Building Centre in Store Street\*. Our

challenge as planners, designers and occupiers is to draw upon this research and these discussions to understand the deeper socio-economic shifts informing this new 'rent economy' and to innovatively design buildings that incorporate adaptive internal placemaking.

Design has always been a factor in commercial property but now it is recognised as key to the success or failure of office environments. Not only have the spaces evolved but smaller and more agile business models have appeared, requiring a radically different design approach to the traditional model. Designers are creating increasingly popular co-working spaces, accommodat- >>>

ABOVE:

Regent's Place, London – Design from masterplan through to interiors

RIGHT:

Our refurbishment and upgrade of the Grade II\* listed 7 Albemarle Street transformed this building into a 21st Century workplace.



Peter Barbalov is a design partner with Farrells



ing the specific needs of freelancers and entrepreneurs – those that would usually work from home, but still want the benefits of an office environment.

The spaces we inhabit have a profound effect on our health and wellbeing too; successful internal placemaking has a positive impact on this whilst improving staff retention. Research tells us that the wrong kind of internal environments affect the performance, experience and sense of engagement of both visitors and occupiers.

This trend has inspired designers to look beyond the more technical needs of an office and the perception of the workplace as a 9-5 only autonomous activity is changing dramatically. New technology, such as smart phones, tablets, webinars and cloud computing, has freed employees from working in one spot. Flexible internal urbanism is therefore key, with break-out spaces and impromptu meeting areas to empower collaboration and co-creation. Beyond this departure from traditional desk-based working, there is also more interest in the quality of the interior design – colour, graphics and quality of natural light for example. The importance of coffee machine conversations become crucial to collaboration and communication. Employees are able to break up time spent in the more formal work environment of the desk with short spells of communication that brighten up the day, improve employee engagement and facilitate a productive and positive working environment. Good office design creates a sense of community and togetherness, breaks down hierarchical boundaries and increases communication horizontally and vertically.

Flexibility has become intrinsic to our thinking and the ability to adapt to change must be embedded within the building's internal urbanism. Recent changes to planning policy, which have meant that office space can be converted to residential without planning permission, certainly wouldn't work if buildings weren't flexible. We should not only be designing buildings for the immediate client, but long-lasting buildings that may have a completely different use or occupier in the future – better facilitating retrofitting which has become the norm. Poor design will result in buildings requiring bigger adjustments and refurbishments between use change, having a shorter life span and potentially demolition, all of which are economically and environmentally unsustainable.

Sustainable design has progressed rapidly in recent years and the construction industry is becoming more environmentally aware. New technology has had a major impact on commercial properties in terms of the materials and techniques used whilst recent trends and regulations have moved towards greater sustainability, more natural environments and less reliance on 'sealed box' technology. The embodied energy of the construction process is also a factor all architects and developers must consider, and the necessary carbon used to construct maintain

and run commercial buildings can now be offset with initiatives such as re-forestation and urban tree planting.

Commercially, workplace design has increasingly become a statement about a company's values and a corporate branding tool, actively improving public realm and amenities whilst conveying the company's style and ethos to clients. New offices embrace the coffee shop and the park around the corner to create a more inclusive and fluid work environment. Modern workplaces often a variety of extended amenities and create places of interest open to the city and its inhabitants - a gallery in the reception, a roof garden, a canteen or coffee shop - all contributing to the variety and richness of the wider urban environment. This is a reciprocal relationship - the office as an extension to the city & the city as an enabler of more inclusive workplaces.

The most successful commercial buildings are those that consider the ever-changing nature of the workplace from the outset. Our own office is in a 1930s furniture factory which, having seen many refurbishments in its long life, has accommodated everything from furniture-making to spitfire production and now architecture. Currently housing offices as well as residential accommodation, we have worked rentable office space into our internal placemaking. The Farrells Creative Hub, open this month, is the latest manifestation of this living building and a great example of how buildings can adapt over time when design proactively plans for change. ■

*\*The NLA's WRK / LDN: Shaping London's future workspaces exhibition runs until Saturday 21st January at The Building Centre, 26 Store St, London WC1E 7BT*

BELOW:  
Farrells in the Hatton  
Street Studios – 90 years  
of change and  
placemaking.

