# WORK IN PROCESS

A large proportion of the world's citizens have been forced into working remotely as offices close and cities lock down in response to a global pandemic. Elly Earls meets the architects rethinking office design, including **Alessandro Ranaldi** from Foster + Partners, and asks how our future working patterns will impact and reshape our urban environments.

As a long-time remote worker, 2020 has been surreal. Whereas a year ago I'd have to explain what 'remote work' meant, office work has almost become a rare extravagance for those that need it. Buoyed by Zoom and other platforms, a cultural shift has rewritten our most fundamental rules on work. The conundrum office builders now face, then, is how to reclaim and rethink those spaces left behind. In short: how to make places where real conversations still happen. For Alessandro Ranaldi, global head of workplace consultancy at Foster + Partners, it's a new challenge that needs to focus on primal instincts.

"Now that we are acquainted to working from home, the office, far from its demise, is needed more than ever to fulfil an essential social role that challenges the five-days-a-week work pattern," says Alessandro Ranaldi, global head of workplace consultancy at Foster + Partners. "With the ability to work flexibly and remotely, the office is a place for connection and gathering, for information exchange, for empathy and experience."

To suit the demands of a changed populace, Ranaldi believes that the office will return not only as a place for work, but as a more meaningful space with its primary functions for collaboration, learning and innovation.

"It will support the kind of interactions that are harder to achieve with technology, which is mostly transactional and greatly dampens one of the fundamental aspects of innovation – serendipity.

"As we see from several studies on what people are missing from their office life, most conversations tend to be goal-oriented – we contact each other for a specific purpose. But it is the random encounters and unplanned conversation that are the most valued form of communication in highly innovative environments." Ranaldi thinks the most helpful way to look at the evolution of the workplace is to consider the most common work modes: solo or focused work, collaboration, socialising and learning. As remote work continues to gain acceptance, he expects that the type of tasks that most offices have been designed for – solo or focused work – will no longer be carried out solely, or even that frequently, in the office. "They can be relegated to 'other places' – our living rooms, kitchen tables, home office spaces or a cafe around the corner," he says.

## The social office

Blaine Brownell, director of The School of Architecture at the UNC Charlotte, North Carolina, agrees that "the future of office design" will include the home. "The need for effective working and learning environments at home has put tremendous pressure on the domestic realm, and residential design is changing as a result," he says. "We can expect to see more dedicated home offices, acoustically partitioned zones and accessory dwelling units in future house designs."

At the same time, Brownell believes design studios that have largely focused on developing plans for pre-existing workplaces should, instead, spend their energies by creatively reimagining the workplace altogether and anew.

Ranaldi is already working on his vision. "We can imagine how
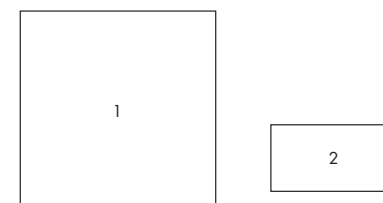


**1.** The entrance hall to the new Comcast Technology Centre in Philadelphia, designed by Foster + Partners.

**2.** One of the tower's radical workspaces, designed for socialising and learning, with fewer open plans.

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Foster + Partners

workspaces will be more synonymous with gathering [and] socialising, featuring larger multipurpose rooms and fewer solo working/focused work environments, more amenities and fewer open plans."

Open-plan offices, then, will become highly focused touchdown spaces, with social activities taking place throughout the day. "This will have a great impact on how we design more socially connected environments enabled by communal spaces, such as atria, and feature stairs and voids, which will help create these hyper-social environments," Ranaldi explains.

Flexibility will also be non-negotiable, with the number, role and working mode of the office's occupants changing perhaps even daily. "Environments will become more interactive and able to respond to changing needs on a daily basis," Ranaldi anticipates. "Spaces will be reconfigurable with movable partitions, [while] beacon technology applications will be able to track and enable us to make better use of our spaces."

The challenge here, according to Brent Capron, interior design director at Perkins & Will, will be around ownership. "Most significantly, I think people will question how space is allocated to individuals, and what control individuals will have over their space," he muses. "Employers will need to evaluate how much physical space they are creating and maintaining for individuals that are only using the space twice a week. Are we really dedicating space or creating a flexible allocation of space?"

To do this, Capron argues, serious questions need to be asked about how offices can best serve their inhabitants. "They will be asking themselves what is important for us to do in person.

Is it collective learning, culture creation, personal connection? And what environments encourage this kind of behaviour? Empowering employees with controllable factors will be important."
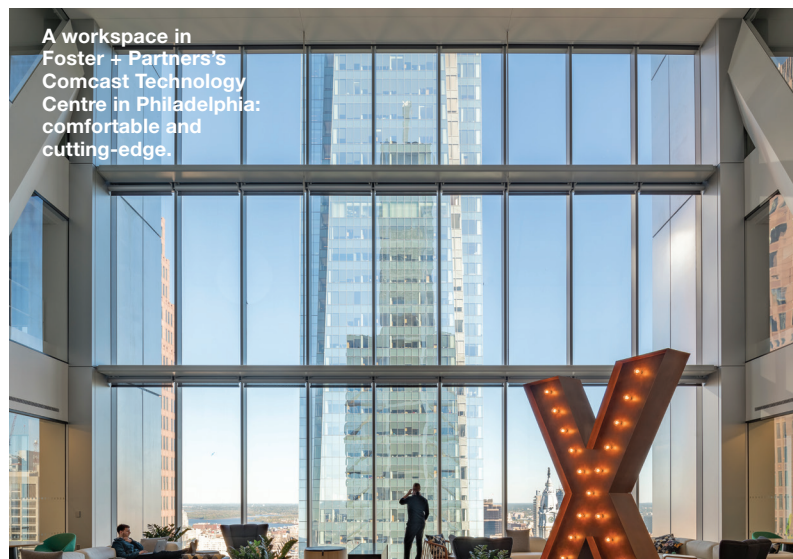
And then there are the less glamorous and more practical factors that come with having 50 people in the office one day and 150 the next. "Companies will need to assess their parking requirements, office hours, security needs, HVAC and lighting systems, and employee services and amenity spaces, from dining to exercise facilities, to meet new demands," says Enrico Caruso, director of design, interiors at HOK's London studio.

From a public health perspective, Covid-19 has clearly brought rapid and significant changes to the physical environment in the form of informational signage, directional markings, physical barriers and separated seating. Brownell says these overlays will not disappear post-pandemic. "They will become a more entrenched part of the design of buildings and landscapes," he predicts.

## Free movement

The more interesting shift, however, will be the growing focus on the less tangible factors that make employees happy and healthy, ensuring that the virtual world doesn't completely wipe out the physical one. "Understanding the broader influences affecting the lives of their employees will be a larger influence on the decisions clients will need to make on the spaces they are creating," Capron believes.

Things were already heading that way, with office designers increasingly focusing on the well-being of a



A workspace in Foster + Partners's Comcast Technology Centre in Philadelphia: comfortable and cutting-edge.

building's inhabitants even before the pandemic.

"The world will not devolve into individuals plugged into personal interface devices interacting only on digital platforms," Capron hopes. "Human nature will lead us to unplug from the matrix and seek out physical contact and interaction, even if it's less ideal than the ones created in the virtual realm."

Ranaldi also thinks the trend towards remote work will impact the very future of our cities, with co-working and satellite office spaces to play an important role. "We see a great potential in these distributed networks of work, which have the capacity to greatly reduce the pressures on our city centres and the carbon footprint generated by transportation."

As these networks of decentralised office space appear closer to our homes, he believes, we will also see corporate headquarters gain new significance. "They will be where corporate culture and values are formed and taught, and a place where staff congregates to develop much-

needed rapport," Ranaldi continues. Brownell agrees that the future is one where there is no longer an exclusive domain for work; it's time for office building typology and zoning models, which currently designate commercial properties as wholly distinct from residential areas, to catch up with the omnipresent workplace enabled by mobile technology. "Work environments can be conceived in much more fluid, flexible and distributed ways. In fact, the 'workplace' will become 'workplaces'."

As Capron points out, remote working does not need to mean working outside cities. In fact, he thinks it has the potential to recharge and reshape our understanding of urban environments themselves, potentially making them more dynamic, liveable, sustainable and activated for longer durations of time.

"The human need to congregate will continue to draw people towards urban environments," he concludes. "It will be up to designers and clients to reshape the spaces that support an increasingly diverse set of activities, both socially, personally and publicly." ●

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