

Office affair

As the shine comes off hot-desking, home working and HQs in coffee shops, a more traditional workspace is back in business

Despite the reams of research and decades of development put in by office designers around the world, the next trends in workplace style usually remain opaque until they're well under way. We've seen work patterns shift and flexibility increase – all in the name of a few percentage points of productivity – as well as a whole generation growing up believing they can slowly sip their way through any number of career options simply by taking up residence in the nearest Wi-Fi-enabled coffee shop and hunkering down.

Flaws swiftly become evident. The hot-desker becomes peripatetic and resentful, while those working the latte shift soak up human experience but miss out on professional buzz, and the four-, three- and two-day week is usually a transparent excuse for management to get more from less. Business needs a business space. In the past few years, the creative freelance community has been slowly coming around to the idea of a traditional office, that once heretical symbol of big business and corporate dreariness.

The rent-by-the-hour office has been around for decades, typically serving up a faceless suite of strip-lit cubicles in an airport-friendly location for desperate last-minute corporate pow-wows. Newer services like ShareDesk hope to harness the internet's matchmaking potential, offering up a global directory of spare

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workspace around the world from New York to Buenos Aires, aiming to pair like minds in what has been described as the nine to five complement to Airbnb.

Many are going further, hankering after more than an algorithmic alliance and choosing their own 'co-workers', filling up spaces that look and feel like a large organisation, but are actually an amoebic alliance of independents. If collaboration comes, it comes naturally. Unsurprisingly, early adopters of this model tended to be in the creative industries – writers, photographers, illustrators and their ilk – who craved a physical desk, a coffee machine and human company.

However, it's the tech industry that has taken the idea of short termism to its logical extreme. 'Part of the driving force is the explosion of tech companies and start-up businesses,' says Nicholas Russell of We Are Pop Up, which provides short-term spaces

1,200
projects in
100
locations

London-based We Are Pop Up finds homes for creative projects from restaurants and yoga studios to office, retail and events space.
www.wearepopup.com

1,500
locations worldwide

Online platform ShareDesk manages flexible office spaces all over the globe, from Astrakhan to Zug.
www.sharedesk.net

2
locations,
150
desks

Central Working offers prime London locations, as well as fundamental business help for start-ups.
www.centralworking.com

3
locations,
32,000
sq m

Spaces provides inspiring work environments in Amsterdam and The Hague with future plans to open in London and New York.
www.spaces.nl

to stores and businesses across the UK. 'Pop-up offices are essential for start-up businesses because they help mitigate risk,' he adds. Small bands of highly motivated people living off their savings while they wait for an injection of VC aren't looking for long-term solutions. Russell cites co-working spaces like The Hub and Central Working in London and their 'campus-like environments', and newer spaces like Shoreditch Works and Headspace, geared up to let companies expand into new space as they grow, or even combine investors' offices with their myriad charges, a sort of incubator model.

What does this mean for design? Frederique Keuning and Martijn Roordink's Spaces communal offices in Amsterdam (see W*166) is filled with Vitra furniture and the aroma of good coffee in the belief that smart surroundings help drive the communal model. Spaces will soon be rolled out to London and New York, bolstering the already busy shared office scene. However, if you're a thrusting VC hoping to yoke a small team into digging a potential goldmine, then perhaps a more formalised approach is needed.

On the edge of London's Shoreditch, Alphabeta is the newest architectural expression of the 'new economy', a fusion of the landmark architecture of the modern corporate HQ with the small office cluster and associated chill-out zones, roof-top bars, lofty atriums and general creative vibe. Actually three existing structures, running the stylistic gamut from proto-skyscraper to heady 1980s-era glass and steel, Alphabeta should open for business in 2014.

Richard Hywel Evans, the architect behind the scheme, describes it as the meeting point between the City's deep pockets and east London's creative thinkers. 'The offices are arranged around a new transparent central atrium,' he says. 'It's very vibrant and part of the external street life that permeates the ground-floor level with restaurants, clubs and galleries. There are flexible meeting spaces for drop-in meetings.' Furniture and fittings, all specified by Studio RHE, will reflect this ad-hoc, clubby atmosphere.

There's still money to be made in the tech industry, as well as fortunes lost. No-one can agree as to whether flexibility is a sop to 21st-century life or a vital part of the equation for the work/life balance. Nevertheless, there are practical reasons for rebuilding office culture from the ground up. Those who once demanded instant offices and quasi-temporary spaces have lurched sharply towards the traditional office model, not the ad-hoc gathering of desks helmed by like-minded people. Perhaps the pop-up office has popped up for the last time and a new, highly styled world of work awaits. ★