



From Workplace to Social Space

The office building of the future should be an essential part of its community

BY DARREL FULLBRIGHT AND DUNCAN LYONS

OVER THE PAST 70 YEARS, the workplace has evolved slowly but surely. In the past 5 months, that evolution has accelerated far more dramatically because of the health, social, and economic upheavals we're currently experiencing. When the dust settles, the office is going to look and feel like a different place than the one we left in March.

Better than Home

Today we recognize that office buildings are no longer just containers for people but rather an experience supercharger. Office performance should be less about maximizing workplace density and more about the quality of the space and the experience it delivers.

Many companies, including Gensler, have been reporting high productivity from home-based employees, but are we working well? Are we learning, mentoring, and building expertise while we are apart from our colleagues?

Working at the office provides one thing we have been craving during the pandemic: in-person, human connection. Once we feel it's safe to go back, we will seek out the spaces that celebrate and support the

ways we work together: social spaces that help to build community and allow real-time collaboration.

Being remote, we can also lose touch with the shared purpose behind our daily tasks. When we return, the office will need to offer more meaningful and immersive experiences to reconnect individuals and teams with their company culture. Like attending a company retreat or spending a day at a theme park, these shared experiences rejuvenate us and elevate us from our home-based work routine.

The Free-Range Workplace

How many people have their best ideas in the shower? Or on a hike? The human brain is at its most creative when we are standing, moving, and mildly distracted by a physical activity. So how do we expect to innovate while we are sitting at a desk?

To spark creativity, we should think of the office less as a single destination and more as a journey of discovery. Our buildings need to resemble the natural settings that we are best adapted to and prioritize



shared ownership of the space and varied, heightened experiences.

Moving between a variety of work settings or between floors gives more opportunities for interaction and engagement. And moving our work easily into all-season outdoor spaces can literally provide a breath of fresh air.

Rather than open plan floors, the future office will be “open section” — providing multi-level settings where our views, movements, and ideas are not constrained by windows and walls. That’s better for our health and well-being and better for the environment.

The New Ground Floor

Nowhere is a new design approach more necessary than

the ground level of an office building. These spaces have typically been dedicated to building security, support functions, and some incidental or “convenience” retail. All of these spaces are dark and empty when the building is not fully occupied, like evenings, weekends, and — of course — during a health crisis. So, when the branch bank or deli struggles for patronage and reduces its hours, the surrounding neighborhood gets no benefit from an empty building.

We believe that with new ground floor programs, office buildings can extend their operating hours and become a more integral part of the community in the 18-hour city.

Destination retail is also undergoing a paradigm shift, but community-oriented programs like health centers, tool libraries, classrooms, and co-working spaces can serve both populations — office tenants and neighbors — at different times.

When office buildings give back space at the ground plane, they also help to evolve the model of the polycentric city. In a mixed-use environment, the ground level of an office building could act as the community center and an anchor for the “20-minute community” that forms around it. After all, we want our office back, but we’d prefer to skip the commute.

Likewise, a highly regional design language and locally sourced materials will also provide a clear identity, a sense of authenticity, and further reinforce the connection to the community. The future office will be site-specific, culturally sensitive, and responsive to the local climate. It will not be a generic glass box that could be dropped in multiple cities or countries.

Smart Buildings and Smarter Metrics

Beyond the ground floor interface, the next-generation office building will be smarter and ready to respond to our needs: it will tell us about the indoor and outdoor air quality that day, which workspaces are open, who else is there, and even where to get drinks and snacks. It can call us a private elevator or map a path to other amenities and create interactive displays for us along the journey. Carbon emissions or energy and water-use will be measured in real time and reported to tenants.

Using tools like Graph by Gensler, these building metrics and spatial analytics can be collected, reported, and compared across portfolios, companies, or the real estate industry at large. With a standardized set of data, this information can then be used to make occupancy and space utilization more dynamic and flexible.

Traditionally in office buildings, shared common areas like lobbies, amenities, and outdoor spaces are counted as rentable but not usable areas, and thus contribute to lower efficiency and the building’s “loss factor.” But these are exactly the kind of spaces that can enrich the experience for occupants and attract a community of tenants to the office. In the future, they will be part of the “gain factor” that adds value for tenants.

The New “Class A”

At the intersection of all these ideas is the need for fresh performance metrics that define this new “Class A.” By adding real-time user ratings, community input, or Experience Index scores to our existing metrics, we can begin to analyze these spaces not just as a series of mechanical systems for supporting work, but as a holistic engine for the community and a space that promotes wellness and social belonging.

The current climate of health, social, and economic upheavals has rapidly accelerated many trends in building design and urban planning, but once we are able to truly measure “performance” in terms of the quality of the space and the human experience it inspires, we can shed the old image of the office building as a hermetically sealed container and begin to realize a new generation of buildings that provide value for the city at large. ■

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Darrel Fullbright is a principal and design director who helps lead Gensler’s Office Buildings Development practice.

Duncan Lyons is a design director and a leader in Gensler’s Office Buildings Development practice.