Notes from the

Future Workplace

Intro

noun

an occasion when something is put
into use or brought to a place for the
first time.

In the last few years, we have learned new words like "quiet quitting," "the great resignation," and "hybrid work." But what is a great workplace and work life of the future?

In the fall of 2022, Design denmark gathered an elite group of thinkers and doers from the fields of spatial design, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and more to explore the future of the workplace.

Future Workplace is a collaboration between Design denmark and Lifestyle & Design Cluster, generously funded by Danmarks Erhvervsfremmebestyrelse.

Here are a few key takeaways from the project.

Community

noun

the people living in one particular area or people who are considered as a unit because of their common interests, social group, or nationality.

In the future, employees want their work to be meaningful. Meaningful in the sense of creating impact and working for a worthy purpose. But also meaningful in the sense that working is part of a community.

The workplace must strive for equality and participation if it wants to evolve as a strong community. Consequently, hierarchies need flattening while power is given back to the employees. Great communities are places that respect everyone as an equal part of the community and of equal importance to the common goals. Strong communities also evolve around collaboration and open knowledge-sharing.

A significant component of community building is to provide space to engage, connect and share. This is because a community is based on a group of people contributing to and helping each other.

A community feeling might be strengthened by various symbolic markers, like having a corporate visual identity or certain unique perks. But actual community building is about facilitating those positive and trusting relations between the employees that make them want to go out of their way for someone else.

In other words: Building a work community is not about ping pong tables and the expensive barista coffee-machine but about stimulating the opportunity for that chat over the coffee machine or water cooler and making work evolve around collaboration and open knowledge-sharing.

In the day and age of hybrid work, creating meeting grounds and invitations to contribute to the community might require intentional facilitation.

Convergence

noun

the fact that two or more things,
ideas, etc. become similar or come
together.

Having run a creative and community-based workspace for the past 15 years, Magnus Thure Nilsson from Media Evolution knows the value of convergence. The chance meetings evolve around open-ended social situations and spaces and are, therefore, also a matter of design and facilitation. These meetings without agendas, where there is convergence across backgrounds and disciplines, host tremendous innovative power.

Convergence typically revolves around a social object - think of the water cooler or coffee-machine conversations. The social object is most often present in the liminal space of work, and it is, therefore, a space representing a break from the defined tasks of work – open and inviting for chance encounters. It thrives on repetition and ritual. However, the social object can also be the facilitated ritual of the social dinner, the Friday drink or anything else that brings a diverse group of people together around a social ritual.

Another way to facilitate convergence is to work with "the square" – the crossroads between floors and functions or the beating heart of the building, as Nilsson puts it. The square should be able to hold myriads of functions and facilitate a multitude of ways to participate. Consider making it a space that can transform into many different forms of social rituals, focusing on flexibility and adaptability.

Decentralized

adjective

used to describe organizations or their activities which are not controlled from one central place, but happen in many different places.

Harvard professor Prithwiraj Choudhury has long followed the "work from anywhere" trend, praising its inevitability and positive impact on employees, organizations, and our climate. But according to Søren Nørgaard, CEO at Teamway, "work from anywhere" is just the starting point of a digital work revolution.

Coming from a generation of cloud natives, he has identified how the expectations to work have reset. This new generation of tech builders wants work to be meaningful, but they also wish for both freedom and economic security, as well as ownership of their work and to be part of a community.

To accommodate this, Teamway is essentially building a new digital, democratic network society owned by the inhabitants. The global network gathers top talent through a peer-to-peer vetting system, where it is the members of Teamway who review new applicants. This way, Teamway ensures that the members have the requirements not to dilute the talent pool and weaken the community offerings of top talent. By conducting such "community services," the members get tokens powered by web3 and blockchain, which equates to ownership shares and governance rights of the community.

Teamway is also preserving the freedom of the individual builders to choose with whom and when they want to work. Still, at the same time, they are giving corporations quick elastic access to top talent without the hassle and expense of go-betweens.

However, Søren Nørgaard sees the infrastructure evolving from more than just a community-based and -owned platform for freelancing top talents. The ambition is to build a complete societal framework around this new way of viewing decentralized work and collaboration.

Already Teamway creates the opportunity for team formations for specific projects. In the future, they expect to encompass peer-to-peer educational programs, company creations within the framework of the Teamway infrastructure, incubation programs based on the TMW tokens and venture capital funding by associated partners for future projects.

Diversity

noun

the fact of many different types of
things or people being included
in something; a range of different
things or people.

When discussing designing for diversity and inclusion, it is important to note that the concept is wide and goes beyond expected aspects, such as the need for accessibility. Today, we consider diversity as context and time-dependent; it is more than just a selection of personal attributes. Over time and in various contexts, most of us will have temporary experiences of not fitting in due to various physical or psychological variables. Where non-inclusive office design might ultimately lead someone to take sick leave, the diverse workplace is designed for and welcomes a multitude of different experiences.

Designing for diversity fosters innovation because it requires developing a more comprehensive range of engagement between users and space. Not only is this better at incorporating future uses and users, but it also creates more innovative and dynamic spaces since designing for diverse groups will enhance innovation.

At 3XN/GXN, My Lunsjö has been instrumental in developing strategic toolsets to help create spatial environments that cater to many different user needs. Working with psychological frameworks, GXN create guides to what type of spatial settings can support or balance various moods and needs of the users. For example, how to create areas for extraversion by using larger scale spaces where the users can 'see and be seen' on the one hand, and areas for introversion with smaller scale spaces, providing a sense of overview and hideout at the same time.

My Lunsjö points to four major categories to consider when designing for diversity. First, you must design to provide agency and choice, empowering the users, not the architecture. Second, you must consider how the design stimulates the health and well-being of the users by providing multisensorial stimuli and working with restorative environments. Third, you need to explore your own bias, for instance, by creating sensorial mappings of the actual users' experience of spaces and situations. And finally, you need to represent users more diversely in your presentations and mockups.

Flexible

adjective

able to change or be changed easily
according to the situation.

The Nordic bank Nordea is doing in-depth anthropological fieldwork to investigate how to create the best possible flexible workspace for their employees in their corporate environment. In a pilot study, design anthropologist Ann-Sofie Vorbeck has used interviews, participant observations, and more to identify four significant components influencing the rhythms of the workspace: The Tribe, the social, the physical and the habitual factor.

The glue in a workplace is the relations between its inhabitants and the collective symbolic and physical markers creating a sense of belonging and a feeling of uniqueness specific to this workplace, to this tribe. The workplace generates identity and community.

The social factor is all about identifying the sensemaking of coming to work and meeting your colleagues. It asks what social motivations there are for employees to come together, check in on each other, and work together.

On the other hand, the physical is the framework, the actual facilities, around all this. It asks more directly: What story do we want the space to tell? How do we utilize spatial design to strengthen identity and a sense of belonging? And how can we create flexible spaces that accommodate diverse use throughout the day?

Finally, the habitual factor explores how the employees experience changes to the habitual workplace environment; for example, what does a free seating concept, where you don't have a permanent desk and where spaces are renegotiable daily, mean to your sense of belonging?

Designing a flexible workspace must consider all these factors to succeed.

Hybrid

noun

something that is a mixture of two
very different things.

Hybrid work and work from anywhere are changing the office landscape and the work-life balance. But it might be a double-edged sword for several reasons. Firstly, it makes work ever more flexible and all-pervasive simultaneously. Secondly, it allows for both more autonomy and more isolation. And thirdly, it can help improve focus and productivity and hinder effective communication and collaboration. Hybrid work is a balancing act requiring intentional leadership and thoughtful use by the employees.

Individual flexibility comes with clear benefits for many. Avoiding the commute and feeling more autonomy surely increases work-life satisfaction. But it might come at the price of the work team or even the organization. It is increasingly difficult to maintain a meaningful culture if the social and collaborative bonds weaken by the individual flexibility granted by hybrid work. Therefore, the hybrid work model also calls for increased social activities and bonding at the workplace - especially where it breaks down siloes and creates new connections.

It is vital to use working from home or anywhere intentionally to suit the work best. For example, by doing focus work or non-complex digital meetings. But it is equally vital that the physical workplace allows for these types of work and not just turn into a co-creative, collaborative open hub. Employees still wish to have the opportunity for privacy and focus work at the office. While LEGO is pushing for an office-less workspace, at the co-working space, Media Evolution, they are embracing the need for the office while at the same time working hard to facilitate the convergence of creative minds. They do this in many ways, for example, by installing sliding doors in the offices, knowing that this will leave many more doors open and lead to more creative exchange.

When embracing hybrid work, it is essential to tread carefully. Job roles differ; not everyone will have the same possibility for flexibility or even the same need. But there must be a sense of fairness in how flexibility is distributed – through hybrid work and other means.

Meeting

noun

a planned occasion when people
come together, either in person or
online, to discuss something.

The average office worker spends 17 hours a week in meetings. This huge number makes it even more strange to think that it took a virus to help us reconsider how we do meetings. What was once taken for granted – that meetings were almost entirely considered physical – has been fundamentally questioned.

According to Claus Sneppen from Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies, both the digital and analogue meeting have their uses, but using them optimally requires considerable thought.

With the opportunity to work from home or from anywhere, employees start shopping time: considering the when, where, and how the meeting should take place to generate the most value.

Claus Sneppen distinguishes between three different forms of meetings: The co-producing, the co-aligning and the co-creative meeting. These meetings scale from low to high complexity and certainty and on importance and unpredictability – the co-producing meeting being the lowest and the co-creative the highest. His point is that the higher complexity and unpredictability etc., the more a physical meeting is needed. This is partly because physical meetings are better for building trust and equality in co-creative and unpredictable meeting situations.

Coincidentally, when you succeed at creating great analogue meetings, it also becomes easier to have more meetings digitally because you build the trust within your team and organization required to do challenging meetings digitally.

Methodologies

noun

systems of ways of doing, teaching,
or studying something.

The evolution of the workplace is data-driven and utilizes a whole host of analytical tools from anthropology and psychology to inform the design of the future work-life and workplace. However, there are distinct differences in approaches.

One way is to use rhythm analysis, walk-along, participant observation, interviews and other approaches rooted in anthropology and sociology to map the user need of a workplace. This method works very well by catering to the specific needs of the users. In our case studies, we found the rhythm analysis and walk-alongs conducted by Natasha Reinholdt from Dekoform and the in-depth observation studies by Ann-Sofie Vorbeck from Nordea particularly impressive, highlighting the strengths of these methods.

Sometimes, however, you are not designing to specific user needs but are more focused on accommodating the changing or more general needs of users over time. In this case, the work of Gitte Just from Be Well – The Wellbeing Agency designing for our senses, or the topological toolkit based on The Big Five Personality Test by My Lunsjö from 3XN/GXN has inspiring perspectives for a more humane and holistic approach to workplaces.

Finally, we see companies with strong cultures and identities develop the workplace to enhance the employees' collaboration, innovativeness, and sense of belonging to the tribe. In the thoroughly impressive case of LEGO, Rune Sanggård Andersen and his design colleagues are working to make space for your best working self by designing around hybrid work to utilize the best of both worlds. At the physical workplace, they are implementing strategies to nurture social interactions and collaborations driven by the culture LEGO wants to emphasize. To do this, they have developed a holistic workplace experience model divided into six additive layers going from the functional and operational to benefits and services as well as community building and engagement.

Reuse

verb

to use something again.

While the introduction of hybrid work has allowed big corporations to rethink their office spaces to suit the social and collaborative needs of the employees, many smaller workplaces must still make do with a limited space that has to serve many different conditions. Maybe even more so than before with the introduction of online meetings.

In several of our case studies, we saw a clear need for creative spatial planning to accommodate the workflow and the many functions needed from just a few square metres. Though office space prices are likely to plummet in the future as decentralized forms of work become common, smaller companies will likely still have to think carefully about planning their office spaces and how they recycle spaces for various functions.

To do this, in particular, flow and noise studies are essential – as they were in our cases with TAKT Studio and Gobo. For TAKT Studio, Waiting for Monday – an Aarhus based design duo – employed a general principle based on their flow analysis and interviews with the employees. They created a spatial plan going from a busy front end and a calm back end and an almost cave-like, homey feel. At Gobo – a retailer of high-end lighting equipment – Karin Lund, Grundplan.nu, used the flow and noise study to untangle the complex workflows.

Another clear tendency identified in the case studies was to recycle spaces for multiple functions and reuse furniture as part of the interior design. These tendencies were most predominant in the case of Den Grønne Friskole. Here newcomers TAK Studio worked holistically using only recycled material to create multifunctional spaces. But we also saw the same interest in recycled materials in big corporations like Nordea.

Sensing

noun

an ability to understand, recognize,
value, or react to something, especially
any of the five physical abilities to see,
hear, smell, taste, and feel.

In his seminal book, The Eyes of the Skin, Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa makes a compelling case against the Western privilege of the visual in contemporary architecture and design. It creates an inhumanity understood as the "consequence of the negligence of the body and the senses, and an imbalance in our sensory system."

Gitte Just from Be Well – The Wellbeing Agency is championing something similar, pointing to the strong correlation between society's focus on the distal senses (sight and hearing) and the increasing amount of people being susceptible to sensory overload. There is a sensory imbalance caused in part by our detachment from nature. By spending up towards 95 % of our time indoors, the proximal senses (touch, smell, and taste) have been neglected, and we have lost a holistic sensory experience of the world.

To increase well-being in the workplace, we need to reconnect the senses to nature by designing for all our senses. Therefore, we need design strategies working with all five senses as a collective whole bringing about the experience of connectedness to the shifting sensations of nature. In other words: Bringing in more houseplants will not do.

However, Gitte also provides five sense hacking tips for quick and dirty sensory imbalance repair work:

1. Make sure to get at least 15 minutes of natural daylight a day
2. Choose warm colours on walls to keep warm
3. Connect with nature every day
4. Fast from digital devices every hour
5. Have peppermint or lavender scents handy at your desk for that immediate stimulus of smell

Storytelling

noun

the activity of writing, telling, or
reading stories.

The Future Workplace case studies displayed a number of different takes on how storytelling and visual identity plays a part in the future of work.

At LEGO headquarters, the LEGO spirit infuses every aspect of work life with graphics and quirky storytelling across walls and glass surfaces, large-sized LEGO models, and LEGO bricks everywhere to be found. The work experience is a brand experience. It also shows how they experiment with spatial planning to create the types of collaboration and community they wish to build. It also shows how they experiment with spatial planning to promote the types of collaboration and community they wish to build. As an overarching philosophy for attracting and retaining employees, LEGO© branded spaces provides play experiences and choice for the employees to work and create.

The case of Gobo – a fine purveyor of high-end lighting systems for museums, concerts and the like – was a bit more downplayed. Karin Lund, Grundplan.nu, worked with the company to employ a subtle brand experience evoking the brand's qualities based on the use of lighting and the tactility of floor and other materials in their office spaces.

Perhaps most intriguing was the case of Den Grønne Friskole, where the values and the didactics of the school seeped into the design process itself. TAK Studio not only embraced the reuse mentality of the school, but they also did the presentations in the collage style of the pupils of the schools. More than that: they also created a story that metaphorically encompassed the values and needs of the school and used that as a guide throughout the design process. Design, design process, values, conditions, and storytelling become one.

Although using symbolic markers, like storytelling, visual identity, and more, to evoke a brand experience and heighten the sense of belonging and communal experience at the workplace. However, in the future, the workplace will focus much more on practices and relations – building tangible communities rather than represented ones.

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LEGO Group, Rune Sanggård Andersen
Louis Poulsen, Finn Jensen
Nordea, Ann-Sofie Vorbeck & Helle Dahl
Media Evolution, Magnus Thure Nilsson
Spacelab, Dorte Friis
TAK Studio, Mai Gjerby Holmqvist & Emilie Rohde
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Teamway, Søren Nørgaard
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The Future Workplace project is a collaboration between:

Lifestyle & Design Cluster.

Design denmark

Generously funded by:

Danmarks
Erhvervsfremmebestyrelse