

Press Pause, Press Play...

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Many times over the last months I've been asked - by people from all over the industry; clients, consultants, journalists and suppliers - what the new, post-Coronavirus workplace will be like? In fact, I've had so many conversations on the subject, it's reminded me of being back at University - probably the last time many of us had the precious gift of time to really reflect on life, as well as the opportunity to define ourselves primarily as thinkers and people of ideas. At the end of each of these recent conversations, I hear myself saying the same thing: let's not allow this seismic event, catastrophic for so many, to be for nothing.

Workplace design has been a huge part of my life for over 25 years. I've loved and embraced its many mutations and evolutions. So, when people ask - 'Do you think we'll go back to cubicle working?' - I feel my whole body shudder. This is a time for listening to the lessons the world **[is]** clearly is trying to teach us and for making big leaps of faith and imagination as a result. It's certainly not the moment to shuffle back into siloed separateness just because fear has temporarily got the upper hand.

One of the biggest things I've heard from so many different people is how much more balanced their lives have felt during lockdown; more centred and true, whilst they in turn have felt less physically tired and stressed, in spite of understandable anxieties about the virus. Surely, this generally-held perception has to tell us something about the future of our working lives? That they need to encompass more flexibility, balance, diversity and better time management? The reset button needs to encompass the whole show.

At the same time, we've all missed all the humour, subtlety, conviviality, energy-sharing and instinctive inspiration that the physical presence of others can bring. I believe, like many others, that this need will absolutely keep the office alive. Whilst we've been more peaceful in ourselves in many instances during lockdown, we've also discovered the limits of 2D communication and just how much can be lost in translation, especially with people we don't know well.

There's been a lot of wondering out loud in the press about changes to the workplace - some knee-jerk and some more considered - but I remain convinced that as industry strategists and

professionals, we have a responsibility to help the next era land in the most positive way possible, with wellbeing, human-scale design and sustainability at the core of what we do, to help nurture a pathway that impacts on so many people's lives. Office spaces, especially in already-crowded cities, need to be fresh-air-filled, community hubs; less chicken coop and more free range.

Technology-driven solutions, combined with the increased trust homeworking has generated between bosses and employees during lockdown, must result in greater choices and freedoms. It won't be all about 'the desk' anymore. We were all guilty, I think, of working blindly towards ever-denser desking ratios; too willing to help clients maximise square footage or real estate value without ensuring people always remained our number one priority.

We now need a future where technology and its developers aim to support rather than dictate the pace at which we want to travel. Yes, the smart phone created an exciting, interconnected world, but its permanent presence also had the net effect of speeding our lives up further, so that we had not only to live those lives, but report on them too, duplicating everything and increasing stress levels more than any of us perhaps realised. The crisis has forced us to hit the pause button of many of its demands, waking up to real birdsong rather than the cheap-cheep of the Twitter feed.

Now that the sounds of traffic outside have started up again, it's time to step cautiously back into the world but clasping our lessons tight and more determined than ever to make a difference. We're all going to be looking for more choice and true agility, as well as for work routines that suit our needs, so we can breathe more and be more present with everyone we interact with. We're going to be looking too for ways to reduce stress and its knock-on effect on ill-health; for ways to enable happier workforces whilst appreciating the impact of happiness of productivity; for an umbrella banner of care in all - for each other, for clients, teams and projects; for more relaxed workplaces with both collaborative and quiet focus areas; for optimum air quality and an increase in terraced and outdoor space; for encouragement of bike travel, storage facilities and showers; for a more sustainable, localised supply chain and for the lessons of the interconnected circular economy to be out guiding spirit.

I don't know about you, but on that basis, I'm definitely ready to play...