

A modern office interior with a mezzanine level. The ground floor features a long wooden table, several large potted plants, and people working. The mezzanine level is visible through a glass railing, showing more office space and people. The overall design is clean, bright, and collaborative.

The Snug Sessions

No.1 | The Future of the Office Space

Author: Ellie Duffy

The Snug Sessions

Introduction

At Derwent London we believe that getting to the essence of places and buildings for people and business in a changing world is as much an art as a science.

The Snug Sessions exist to explore the art – as well as the science and humanities – of spaces and places now and in the future. The aim is to define new directions and forge positive pathways in an intelligent, cross-disciplinary and human-centred way.

‘Poetry is nearer the vital truth than history,’ wrote Plato (it is thought) in around 380 BC. So, to get to the heart of the

matter we asked modern-day poet Rhael ‘LionHeart’ Cape to convene conversations with friends and collaborators of Derwent London. At the end of 2021 and during the first half of 2022, we had seven sessions addressing different facets of our built environments were filmed at the Snug in DL/78, 78 Charlotte Street in Fitzrovia – a convivial Derwent setting perfect for exploring ideas through dialogue.

Buildings and spaces don’t exist in a vacuum, they reflect people, feelings, cultures and expertise. Neither are they static – good buildings need to flex and adapt with the world as it changes. To borrow from the words of visionary thinker Stewart Brand, our buildings and spaces need to learn. Because what we do now ripples into the future.

The Snug Sessions -
The future of the office space

“Why has it taken a worldwide pandemic to get us to focus on what feels good at work?”
asks LionHeart



He's in the DL/78 snug discussing the post-pandemic office space with Tim Hyman, Derwent London's Group Architect, Nile Bridgeman, Architect and Co-Founder of Event and Zine Afterparti, and Architect Julian De Metz of dMFR.

Everyone's in agreement that pandemic has accelerated a journey we were already on – a seismic shift towards new, more flexible ways of working. How is the design of office space evolving to support changing priorities in the UK's post-industrial economy?

At a glance

- Wellbeing in the workplace is about **collective futures** as well as the needs of individuals now
- New approaches to office placemaking **promote work-life balance** in an increasingly 24/7 culture
- Office design for the future supports **increasingly collaborative** and **cross-disciplinary ways** of working
- Intelligent office space solutions **harness tech for sustainability** and **creatively optimise** the reuse of existing buildings.
- The future of the office is personalised, with **organisational culture** and **character becoming increasingly** important differentiators in business
- Future workspaces **align physical space** with **virtual worlds**

Reading the room

“Young people are looking for workspaces that reflect a life balance”
observes Nile Bridgeman



White Collar Factory EC1

It's clear that attracting, retaining and nurturing talent is top of agendas across the work sectors. What we're seeing is a shift, with young talent and cross-generational learning identified as key to future sustainability in the knowledge economy, creative industries and beyond.

“They're looking for something they can't get in their front room” observes Nile Bridgeman. LionHeart agrees, pointing out that onus is on design to address the mindsets of a new generation intent on wellbeing and balance.

For many in the development sector, the pandemic was a big eye opener, observes Tim Hyman. “But with the Derwent focus on the people who use places and spaces, on layering amenity and community, it isn't such a step-change.”

Generation gap?

“A real meeting of minds – or a creative collaboration like a workshop – needs to be done in person.”

says Tim Hyman

LionHeart wants to test the group’s faith in the value of real, shared space. Is it perhaps a question of a generation divide, he asks, with Millennials and up indoctrinated in the idea of the physical workplace? Might it be totally normal for the next generation to put on a pair of glasses to virtually communicate?

Julian De Metz disagrees: “In the creative industries, people and generations really need to work together,” he says. “We’re vocational and educational and people learn and develop from working with others. For us, going back to the office was a no-brainer”.

Tim Hyman is also sceptical about a virtual-only future. “Thinking through the prism of the next generation, they may believe after two years of pandemic that being digitally connected is everything,” he says. “It’s only lived experience that tells you that’s no substitute for meeting friends, working alongside colleagues or being in the same space as mentors. I think it’s unwise to underestimate the importance of the social side of life – for business and wellbeing.”

Wellbeing – the new metric



25 Savile Row W1

Awareness of wellbeing is something everyone in The Snug agrees shouldn't be unlearned as the pandemic recedes. But unpack wellbeing and what does it actually mean – is it all about the individual and the moment or is it about collective futures and nurturing organisational cultures?

'There's a quality to well-designed space that's almost indefinable,' suggests Tim Hyman, "An x-factor that gives people a little endorphin buzz. The real proof of good space is how well loved it becomes by people over time. And that shared experience of space is, in itself, a contributor to wellbeing. Amenity, wellbeing, sustainability – they're all part of the Venn diagram of the future office."

A move towards valuing and measuring wellbeing in the built environment is a trend identified by Julian De Metz: "If you look at some of the newer sustainability measuring systems like WELL, it's really interesting to see how wellbeing and quality of life are now part of the metric. The emerging metrics also happen to be a much better fit for creative reuse and retrofit projects."

People, place and technology

Real space does something that digital connectivity can't, the group agrees – connecting all the senses in real time in three dimensions, and explaining, for instance, why food always tastes better in well-designed surroundings.

Spatial experience isn't just visual, it's about tactility and sound, not to mention the proprioception and vestibular senses, all working together. But does the future of work have to be either/or?

Tim Hyman calls for balance: “I don't believe creativity is sustainable solely in 2D, collaboration and interaction are essential for any business. On the other hand, we are witnessing a big shift away from the old 9–5 culture and its presenteeism towards a new 24/7 world. And I think, handled right, that's a positive thing. The spaces

we need now are amenity rich, flexible and socially intelligent with enhanced technology and mode control”.

As the metaverse, AR and VR take hold, all the signs point to more overlap between physical and virtual modes. And in the workplace, it's design that's enabling increasingly seamless integration with technology.

“Tech is a great thing but there needs to be a balance,” says Nile Bridgeman. “You gain so much from being in the same space as colleagues, whether that's orbiting a physical model, seeing someone's eyes or reading body language.” Julian De Metz agrees, arguing that while technology is a great tool for enhancing collaboration, it can't replace the synchronicity that happens when people get together space.

Making space for collaboration

“There’s no doubt that increasing cross-disciplinary collaboration calls for new angles on office workspace”

says Tim Hyman

Inevitably, the conversation turns towards the race to net zero. Everyone agrees that an interesting by-product is a renewed sense that we’re all in this together – whether that’s business, the design industries, employers or employees. As we strive together towards collective goals, the future is looking ever more collaborative.

The impact of digital technologies is having a similar effect, with a burgeoning of multi-disciplinary approaches being seen across sectors. Architecture and



Brunel Building W2

development are just one example, with digital twins beginning to have a big impact on the ways people work together and communicate with their stakeholders.

“It’s also very clear in my mind that we’ll be designing increasingly for mode control – the offices of the future aren’t going to be either ‘on’ or ‘off’ but will use energy and resources more intelligently” says Tim Hyman. “Controllability is a big aspect of sustainability, and it’s also where technology comes in.”

Personality and place – one size no longer fits all

What's the one thing you think we'll see more of in office design in the next 10 years?, asks LionHeart.

Nile Bridgeman says it's loose-fit with personality. "The office is going to be less and less about suspended ceilings and uniform lighting," he predicts. "We need buildings and systems that can adapt to a number of uses over time, that can flex with shifts in culture and society. We need non-sterile spaces that attract people and talent."

Julian de Metz also identifies character as key to the future. "I think increasingly every building and space is going to be different and surprising. Some of the older standards

for office design are quite prescriptive, for instance. But it actually encourages waste to say 'your grid needs to be like this, office lighting needs to be this level of lux, the ceiling should be like this'. It also discourages personality."

"It's quid pro quo," says Tim Hyman in relation to shifting working patterns. "But design is what will help get the balance right. I call our projects places, not buildings, because they aren't closed systems but engage openly with people and surroundings, with different levels of privacy for users and their guests. Enabling different work modes alongside amenities for wellbeing and socialising means people can have more control over their lives, not less".

Click here to checkout the [video](#) or [podcast](#).