WORK BRIEF FURTHER READING

MAKING WORK FIT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

What do we want from work in the 21st century? COVID-19 has put systems in flux and presented a timebound opportunity in which to recast work as a social activity, rather than solely as an economic activity. Within this context:

- How do we create a social layer and wider purpose to work?
- How can we rescale the places, settings, systems and artefacts of work to create a new model of work that goes beyond the 20th century economic growth model to meet wider obligations and goals?
- How can work include a commitment to community, locality and environment, rather than simply to employer and business growth? How might these values intersect with current trends?
- What are the intervention points for designers of all kinds to contribute to this work? Design could focus on whole policy frameworks, architecture and buildings, to the desk and home space, the body or the communications tools we have in place to work.

Ultimately, how can we create common design principles that would apply across different archetypes of work and provide:

- Human agency
- Common, purposeful space
- Community

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that design could have a major role in reshaping work, employment and livelihoods as we navigate the post-lockdown world. This crisis has unveiled the criticality of digital services and essential workers in keeping society running; has accelerated imminent changes such as uptake of remote working and artificial intelligence; and has also put at the forefront some wider issues such as mental and physical wellbeing as well as our relationship and definition of work.

Design thinking transpires in very tight corners and in precarious situations, from war to natural disasters, and from these challenges, solutions emerge. COVID-19 has 'paused' the machine and challenged what is essentially a 20th century model of work. It has launched us into a renewed model that could be more fit for the 21st century. Work is now required to be more networked, more human-scale and people-centred and more flexible. From this, new ecosystems may emerge, organisations and business models as we know them may dissipate, and new ways of organising work and life could come to the fore.

SCALING DIFFERENTLY

Business models have traditionally predicated success on scaling up, be it bigger teams, bigger office buildings, factories, increased automation and within this context the human becomes smaller and smaller. COVID-19 has been a shock to the system, that might allow us to reorient and rethink this model, making work human scale.

We can reimagine scale to provide a human focus to work. While not all organizations will reduce in scale, new ways of operating could bring together a swarm of individuals to solve a particular problem, much like small organisms coming together to create the great barrier reef, placing humanity at the centre of the system. While we could collaborate with AI to augment our capabilities, we would do this in a context that delivers our individual and collective goals.

The way in which we design work can also address some of the biggest human-centred challenges, be it an ageing work force, uneven distribution of work, widespread unemployment that may be coming down the pipeline or a general dissatisfaction with work as it exists today.

This could be the opportunity to redefine what success looks like, driven not just by economic wealth, but happiness and wellbeing; designing an idea of success fit for the 21st century.

HUMANITY AND AGENCY

We need to ask ourselves, what is the world of work that we want in the future? Care homes and poor-quality new building developments are symptomatic of a system that prioritises profit over people. How can we ensure that we better incorporate humanity within our economic models? How do communities pay for things they value, or recognize services they feel are deserving?

If we want to provide people with a sense of control over their lives, a sense of agency, we need systems to create boundaries. For example, when working from home, how can people differentiate between work and leisure when remaining in the same place? How can people reclaim a sense of time? For people working in jobs where they have little control over the activities or tasks they have to complete, how can work become something more joyful?

PHYSICAL, DIGITAL AND PLACE

Digital services have ensured that businesses are able to continue functioning as lockdowns across the world have forced people to work from home - digital technologies have allowed businesses to stay afloat in a time of crisis. This has meant the physical spaces in which all types of work are completed have transformed dramatically. Shops and offices, now lying empty, may have to grapple with their role within city landscapes going forward as demand for them declines, monuments of the 20th century economy. Their designs will need to reflect the changes in people's behaviours and spaces will need to be repurposed creatively.

At the same time, for many, homes have now become workplaces, and responsibility to maintain and create workspace has shifted to the individual. We are connected to our work digitally, but have increased our physical connections with our local neighbourhoods and local places may take on renewed importance in everyday lives. This could give us the opportunity to reassert our position as citizens, to contribute to the wellbeing of our local communities in a meaningful way.

ESTABLISHED NETWORKS, COLLISIONS AND CHANCE ENCOUNTERS

When workforces are distributed across cities, countries and globally, how do you drive innovation forward? As we lose the physical office space, we lose the physical networks that allow us to have chance encounters, new discussions and collisions of ideas. Digital environments need to adapt in order to not only transmit information, but also provoke human emotions and thoughts.

While workers may want increased flexibility, and to not return to the way work was before, without a critical mass of people, the office loses its network effect. In order to keep the strong ties needed for innovation, we need to build a sense of strong and coherent teams, even when they are not physically connected. Across all sectors, dedicated communal space is vital to provide a place where relationships are built between colleagues, and work becomes more enjoyable for workers.

As some workers remain working at home, their interactions with housemates, spouses and children may be the kind of collaborative discussions that drive forward innovation.