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The 'Workplace Progress' Issue

Think outside the CBD

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Simon Pole, global design director at Unispace, says that the CBD has had it too good for too long. As workplace designers, this is our moment to look beyond the office towers.

Over the years, workplace designers have fallen into a trap: we've been guilty of creating the utopian one-stop shop in the CBD office tower.

After all, our corporate clients have wanted to keep their employees at the office for longer hours, to generate more revenue and deliver greater efficiency. But they've also needed to keep those employees happy. So, over the past decade, they presented us with CBD office blocks designed in a bygone era with their private offices and cubicles, and 2.7 metre-high ceilings, and into those spaces we crammed all the creature comforts that typically keep people happy in their home in the suburbs.

We creatively made the office resemble the home, adding sleep pods, cafés, zen rooms, 24-hour vending machines, kids' homework clubs, and even running tracks. Think self-contained, vertically stacked conveniences within a single office tower maintained at a comfortable 21.5 degrees Celsius.

But why are we using expensive CBD space to recreate the parts of our lives which work much better in situ? In other words, on our doorstep, in the fringes, or at least in our neighbourhoods.

And of course, employees have now discovered – after months of working from home – that being part of the community is what makes them feel good. They'd rather walk out into the sunshine and

fresh air, and head around the corner to an independent coffee shop and bakery, than get in the elevator and ride up to level five just to see the same faces and pour a cup of the same old brew.

Deservedly the CBD has become a successful brand, and some clients are convinced their business has to be located there to be credible. But maybe that's just because we haven't shown them an alternative that can maintain their CBD status while using the surrounding urban environments to their advantage.

While suburban office parks and out-of-town campuses have thrived in some industries, notably technology, they're often associated with beanbags and games rooms. The very mention of moving out of the CBD may cause clients to flinch if they're in finance, insurance or law. Perhaps as designers we haven't developed a good enough solution and told the story convincingly enough to make them believe.

Of course, mixed in with all this is the home. We've grown accustomed to being able to put our heads down for focus work at home, then taking the dog for a walk at lunchtime. We can get something out of the freezer mid-afternoon, take 15 minutes out to get the kids from school, and replace the commute time with a few extra work calls. Home is the best place to be when you need to concentrate, learn, and find some headspace.



Simon Pole is global design director at Unispace.

But it's not so great when you need to meet a client, collaborate with your team, or use specialist equipment. So we're all learning to do blended working – across office, home and flexible working spaces. Agile and activity-based working methods taught us how to be mobile inside the office, and a lockdown has taught us how to be mobile and flexible externally – both physically and mentally. It's now time to use all these new skills to improve the work lives of employees in all industries and sectors.

Maybe there is a solution which can benefit both employees and the corporate occupiers. Wedged between the CBD and the suburbs are some untapped brownfield development opportunities just crying out to be repurposed into workspaces for those finance, insurance and law firms.

Old mills, dockyards and warehouses can be transformed into elegant workspaces, offering a credible supplement to the CBD. Why credible? Because we've now discovered that people are more productive when they're liberated, not when they're trapped 9am-5pm between plastic plants and colourful corporate slogans on walls.

Urban planners have been perfecting the dense residential model with great retail hub attributes near convenient transport hubs, but they are missing the work hubs. These hubs should be well-located, inspirational volumes of space for collaboration houses, innovation academies and co-created client

sessions; a truly engaging experience that offers more than the office tower at a more affordable price, with the rental investment lower than in the CBD.

People want to get to work faster, because travel wastes time. And they'd rather that travel didn't involve being packed shoulder-to-shoulder with strangers on public transport. Instead of going to the office gym, maybe they'd like to head over to the one they've chosen for themselves, or exercise down by the beach, out in the open where they're more likely to meet new people.

If our clients prefer a CBD presence, maybe we could show them how to have a more efficient one, taking into account the data that shows that people are productive concentrating at home, but acknowledging that there's tasks that work better in an office setting. We, as designers, can demonstrate the value of an urban shift to offer a greater opportunity to their employees and clients in a location that provides the best of what we all love about the neighbourhood and community.

And it's up to us, as designers, to tell our clients that they, too, can be released from the trap of old thinking: of going with the same plethora of costly amenities, in the same expensive building, in the same part of the CBD. If the pandemic has done anything positive, it's made us sit up and reconsider how we do things. If the biggest social upheaval in almost 100 years can't make us do that, what will? This is our moment.

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