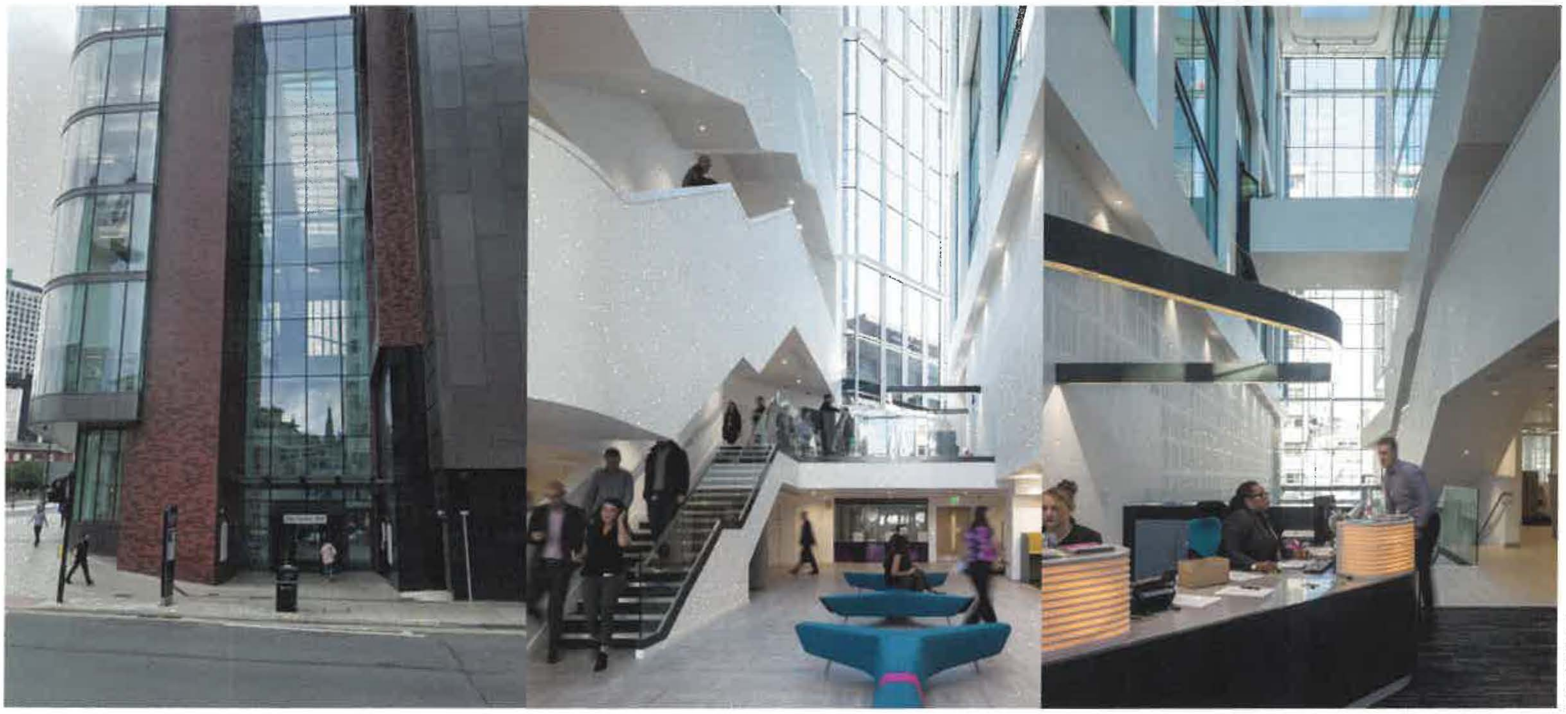
1 Offices

We can make the changing office a better place to work

We still need – and want – the office. And there are lots of ideas for how it will work post-pandemic

Words: Ruth Slavid



NICK CAVILLE

Above BDP's refurbishment of the 1970s Merrion House for Leeds City Council allowed them to consolidate more of their staff on the one site, while radically improving their working environment.

Will we ever get back to the office? This has been a frequent question during the Covid lockdown. One person who is convinced that we will is Edward Williams, managing director of Edward Williams Architects. Speaking at the RIBA PiP webinar on office developments, Williams showed a small but delightful project that he has designed, repurposing an existing building in a mews in Paddington, London.

Even more interesting was his conviction that we must return to work in offices. 'Our own office has been 60-70% less efficient when working from home,' he said. And this was despite the fact that 'we are benefiting from the flywheel effect of having worked together in offices when working from home now.' He believes that 'we overestimate that when we think about what working from home means for the future.'

Sunil Johal, director of Be Flow Consultancy, a development consultancy, also agrees that we need offices, although he thinks that they will be very different from the ones we have known up until now. 'It's impossible to miss the importance of social interaction to human society,' he said. But he reminded attendees that we are moving into a workforce with up to five generations. It is the huge number of young people entering the workforce who will shape the future.

'Young workers want to create networks, friends who will support them later in life,' Johal said. 'How can you do this if you are not together? The workplace must not feel like a prison cell – it must feel like a creative hub, a place that sparks and nurtures new ways of thinking.'

We will in some ways be moving back to a pre-industrial model of work, he argued, where, before the introduction of the factory there was no concept of how long you worked or at what time. Instead, work was measured in terms of output.

Johal's vision of the office of the future was fascinating, if a little perturbing. Young people will, he said, be choosing their workspace based on facilities and lifestyle, but also on sustainability. He suggested the possibility of touchless offices, to get round the fact that touch points are where viruses can survive. And, he said, virtual reality will link the nucleus with more distant workers. This is a technology for which we have already seen demonstrations.

More radical was his belief that the office could deliver good health, possibly extending workers' lives by as much as 10 years. 'The best employers,' Johal said, 'will bring you into a space where they will genetically test you, monitor you and manage you. They will optimise your wellbeing.' For many this smacks too much of Big Brother.

The wellbeing of the workforce is however of primary importance, and that means the entire workforce. Julie Fleck, a strategic access and inclusive design advisor, outlined just how badly we are still doing in terms of people with disabilities.

'Most people acquire their disability while at work,' she said, 'but over half of workplaces exclude disabled people.' The situation will only become worse with the rising age of workers. There is pretty good legislation now, although there is still room for improvement.

She gave an example of a project that has worked really well in terms of accessibility for all – 5 Pancras Square by Bennetts Associates – and showed other projects that demonstrate pitfalls. Too often, she said, when working on existing buildings, designers find excuses. 'I worry we will say it's too difficult and expensive,' Fleck said. 'We have to do it or we will be excluding people.'

One project where there was a determination not to exclude people was the refurbishment of Merrion House in Leeds for Leeds City Council. Philip Ellis, architect associate for BDP which carried out the work, explained how his practice managed to centralise formerly disparate department locations by refurbishing and expanding the building, which was designed in the 1970s. It has always been occupied by the council, but was tired and inefficient.

In addition to a new energy strategy, the architect made improvements that led it to win the West Yorkshire LABC award for best accessible building. These included introducing a changing village, prayer room and hearing loops, plus signage in Braille. 'We went through a lot of work to get orientation and accessibility good and the best light levels,' Ellis said. He believes 'local authorities are driving this agenda more successfully than private developers. We have been able to fit an agenda of increasing diversity into an existing building.'

Another health issue that is under-appreciated is the impact of noise, explained Ben Hancock, managing director of Oscar Acoustics. He quoted the chief medical officer for England who has said that noise is second-only to pollution in damaging our health. Yet a survey that Oscar Acoustics commissioned of 2000 employees showed that they had little appreciation of the impact of noise in the workplace. In particular, few realised that it could contribute to stroke, diabetes and relationship breakdowns.

The survey has shocking figures, such as that 11% of millennial men have acted violently as a result of noise. Hancock described the work that his company has done for clients including Gensler and Delos, the founder of the WELL building standard.

Offices are getting better in all sorts of ways, and changing. They may never return to the way that they were, but we can embrace that as a positive move.


AGNESE SANVITO

Above Edward Williams Architects' repurposing of an existing Paddington mews building in London has created office space with a sense of considered, domestic charm.

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