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The Emerging Social Infrastructure of Work and Why the Workplace Industry Needs to Think Outside its Ever-Shrinking Boxes

Andy Lake

The world of work is changing fast, with an unprecedented take-up of 'remote working' accelerating pre-existing trends to decentralised working. However, the workplace industry, planners and residential developers alike seem to be captive to an Industrial Age mindset that still sees the separation of work from the rest of life as the norm.

This article explores the range of trends from homeworking during the pandemic to Industry 4.0 that mean we need a transformational approach to designing and supporting all the places where people work, and an end to the exclusive – and intrinsically conservative – focus on the collective workplace.

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The experience of so many people working remotely has greatly accelerated trends to working smarter. We are at a moment when we should be taking a significant leap forward in how we understand the model of the extended workplace. This is one where an ever-increasing number of work activities can be carried out in non-traditional settings. Currently, foremost among these other spaces is the home, but it also includes public spaces and shared professional spaces.

The workplace industry may unwittingly be a force for conservatism in this regard, by maintaining an almost exclusive focus on traditional collective workplaces, where people gather in the premises of an employer. The danger is their advice to employers thinking about change doesn't pay sufficient attention to all the other places people can work.

> **The vision of the future seems to be "*yesterday, tweaked a bit*"**

In this article I will set out the reasons why this position is not tenable, and why a much more transformational and outward-looking approach is needed to meet the emerging realities of 21st century working.

The embedded assumptions behind the collective workplace

As the modern workplace has evolved over the last 200 years, it has substantially shaped the way we live, as well as the ways we work. Locating work in places separated from the rest of life is a characteristic of the Industrial Age. It made sense when so much work was dangerous, noisy, toxic or smelly.

Concentrating people together with the resources they need for their work provided efficiency and genuine economies of scale. Despite the dark underbelly of exploitation, it provided for the economic growth that underpinned unprecedented prosperity in the developed world, with hundreds of millions of people acquiring much higher standards of living.

From the early 20th century, progressive thinking focused on developing collective mass solutions to serve the population: for education, health, transport and housing. All of these were rooted in the industrial approach of large-scale standardised solutions that work for the greatest number people.

Housing programmes were launched that assumed this separation between where people live and where most of them would work. Transport systems were devised to shift workers between home and work *en masse*. Mass education developed on a factory model, removing children from their home habitats to deliver economies of scale and to acculturate the next generation of workers to tightly scheduled work in collective environments.

Offices too developed on a factory model, in many cases co-located with industrial premises. The mid-20th century office became a factory for efficient flows of information on paper, with its typing pools and vacuum tubes. Gathering the people together with their paper and the hierarchy of command made good sense.

This separation of work from the rest of life became embedded in planning law, in the assumptions of architects and developers, and in the mindset of employers across sectors.

These assumptions have helped to shape the workplace industries we have now: those that build the workplaces, design the interiors, analyse working practices and manage the facilities. Even amongst the most radical of those who wish to reshape the workplace, we rarely find a willingness to address the full implications of the declining need to separate work from other places.

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Digitisation and decentralisation

The advent of computers and digitisation provides the potential to shift those imperatives to concentration and centralisation into reverse. It is increasingly more efficient to enable people to access their work from wherever they are, rather than require them to come into a central location to work.

Organisations are often slow to connect the digitising of processes, services and products to how employees work. The mindset of bringing everyone together persists even when it becomes less necessary – and increasingly inefficient – to do so.

The rapid advances in technologies for remote access and virtual collaboration form a key plank in the platform for working from alternative locations – and for recruiting the people with the most appropriate skills, wherever they live in the world.

The people voting with their feet

We have seen during the recent pandemic the viability of working remotely. Surveys during the grand homeworking experiment of 2020 show that the majority of those who have been working from home believe they can do so productively. The Leesman Index survey of some 165,000 home-based workers during the pandemic found that 'home' scores higher for productivity amongst respondents than a typical office in the index, and on a par with the best performing offices[i].

I've been researching the impacts of remote and flexible working since the 1990s, and measured studies overwhelmingly show increases in productivity from people who have greater control over the time and place of their work. Many employers have adopted 'smart' or 'agile' working precisely because they see the value of this, as well as the opportunity to reduce the overheads of work.[ii]

During the lockdowns of 2020, many of the management, cultural and technical barriers to more widespread distributed working have disappeared. Looking over a range of surveys, employees' responses are indicating on average:

- A doubling of the numbers who want to work remotely on a full-time basis.

- A doubling of the numbers who wish to do so for part of the time

- An aspiration from part-time homeworkers to work 2-3 days per week from home in future, up from 1.5 days per week on average prior to the pandemic.[iii]

So unless organisations decide to force people back into the office (and indeed, some might), we're looking at substantially lower rates of occupancy. It is inevitable, and entirely sensible, that employers will look to reduce the amount of workplace real estate they directly control, greatly accelerating trends that have gathered momentum over the past three decades.

It's not all about offices

It would be wise to sound a note of caution about the surveys I refer to. Those who respond are overwhelmingly office-based workers. Let's put this in context.

In the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that at the height of the lockdown, 46% of workers were working full-time from home. The pre-pandemic level is 14%, including those who use their home as a base and work in other places, too. So more than 50% of people were working in their regular workplaces, or were furloughed because they couldn't work remotely. However, 80% of office-based employees were working from home.[iv]

So, let's look beyond the office to how the new world of work impacts these other workplaces e.g., in industry, construction, transport, retail, defence, healthcare and education.

I work regularly with organisations that have many hands-on types of work. The Smart/Agile Working approach is not one-size-fits-all. The key is to break down the work into the tasks and activities involved, to see the extent to which they can carried out at different times and/or locations and what might need to change for this to be the case.

If we take the case of an engineering company, there are typically many people whose roles are dominated by hands-on tasks. However, many people perform activities that are in principle location-independent, such as design, planning, costing, sourcing, project management, winning new work and working directly with clients. Then there are managers and team leaders who have a

supervisory role and need to be close to the people and work being carried out, but whose work is not for the most part directly hands-on. They need to have the tools and the spaces that enable them to work both close to the hands-on work and also elsewhere.

Or take the case of laboratories. Spending time at a workbench is only part of the picture. There is also the planning, monitoring, analysis and reporting that is often best done somewhere else. Working with live data is part of the picture. Best practice involves having excellent laboratory information systems so people can work with the data from wherever they happen to be. A lot of the work that is often thought to be immutably location-dependent turns out not to be.

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The spatial impacts of automation, artificial intelligence and robotics

Increased automation, artificial intelligence and robotics are also part of the emerging picture, the so-called Industry 4.0. Discussion invariably focuses on what these technologies will be able to do, and the simplistic question, "*Will robots take my job?*"

Here the workplace industry should be concerned with the potential spatial impacts of widespread uptake of these technologies. They take digitisation several steps further, by enabling people to work with intelligent, automated or semi-autonomous systems.

Examples might be an aircraft engineer working with an inspection robot that crawls through the engine of an aeroplane at a remote airport[v], or a drone carrying out a micro-inspection of the fuselage[vi], instead of the plane having to fly to a specialist hangar for the inspection. Or a person working on a software upgrade to a robotic system in healthcare or carrying out analysis of its performance. Or someone supervising the operation of self-driving vehicles or vessels, whether in a mine, on the streets, at sea or in space.

Clearly in those examples there is the need for a facility to build the systems involved. But for those who innovate in this field, monitor, analyse, maintain and upgrade these systems – where will they work? In principle, it can be from pretty much anywhere.

Retail has been moving in a similar direction in many ways. Bricks-and-mortar shops still require staff, of course. However, an ever-increasing amount of retail takes place online. People can run an ecommerce operation from a spare room at home. More substantial operations turn over billions of dollars without having any customer-facing premises at all, and in some cases without any inventory

of their own and using third-party logistics. It's all about sourcing and supplying with minimal overhead.

What we are looking at is an acceleration of an existing trend in how space is used. Manufacturing, assembly, retail, warehousing and logistics will have fewer people, who work alongside automated systems. But not all of them need to be physically in the facilities they operate. Meanwhile, ever smaller offices will be more intensively used – not by the whole workforce at the same time, but on an as-needed basis.

This is a trend barely recognised in planning systems and land use allocations, though it has been developing for at least three decades. The simplistic relationships used between size of workplace facility and number of employees no longer apply. Policy remains stuck in the Industrial Age for the most part. I see it as being part of the role of the workplace industry to wake up policy-makers and politicians to the new realities.

What is the workplace for?

So, with all this accelerated change, the too-often-forgotten question becomes more crucial than ever: *'What is the workplace for?'*

'The workplace' as a separate and indispensable place has become embedded in our consciousness. It has served as the place where work gets done, where the organisation asserts its status and identity, where we meet our colleagues, meet customers, make friends, maybe find a life partner, fool around, gossip and complain.

Relatively little of this is indispensable in the emerging world of work. 'The workplace' has become both a more extensive and a more nuanced reality. It's one with blurred boundaries. And understanding this wider workplace should be making more of an impact on the workplace industry.

The emphasis during 2020 has been shifting towards a model of 'hybrid working'. While this recognises the possibility to work in different places, for me this is an inadequate and rather regressive concept, along with its cosy counterpart: '*the new normal*'.

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The greatest weakness of the 'hybrid working' model is that the concept lacks the transformational dimension central to 'Smart' or 'Agile' Working. It seems an inherently conservative compromise with a rapidly changing world that both employers and the workplace industry seem reluctant to face. One can comfortably slip into hybrid working without much really changing. You just do the same work, but in two or more different places.

This can lead us down blind alleys like specifying a set number of days to 'be in the office' or a rota of people homeworking so that everyone can find a desk[vii]. It's easy to understand why people come up with these ideas, but they are seriously flawed and based on traditional, presence-based and command-and-control approaches to work.

Put simply, the choice and timing of the location of work should flow primarily from the nature of the tasks being carried out, with a good element of employee choice in the mix. It should relate to the results that are sought, the financial and environmental costs of the choices made, and of the security and interaction needs involved. Setting arbitrary requirements, e.g., *'This team in on Monday, that team in on Tuesday'* will be inefficient and compromise the productivity of many people whose activities are best undertaken elsewhere on the day specified.

So, why attend the workplace at all? Beyond carrying out some hands-on or site-specific activities, there are now few unchallengeable reasons to do so. Even for collaboration and teamwork, there are choices to be made.

'Home is better for focus work, the office for collaboration' – but is this true?

During the pandemic, we have seen an emerging wisdom that home is great for focus work, while the office wins for collaboration[viii]. For the past two or three years, there's also been a bit of a buzz at conferences about seeing the office as 'event space'.

There is a certain logic to this, and it is supported to some extent by recent surveys. However, it's much more nuanced than that. We've seen during the pandemic an incredible rise in virtual interaction, and seeing it used for all kinds of collaborative purposes.

Admittedly, six hours of Zoom or Teams calls in a day is somewhat wearying. But this results from trying to replicate stultifying in-person meeting practices in the online space. The tools we now have create great scope for having fewer, more streamlined and more dynamic interactions. Running back to the office to collaborate is a regressive step in many instances. We should be seizing the opportunities to be much more innovative and purposeful in how we collaborate.

It's also the case that focus work and collaborative work are not mutually exclusive – and the trend is for them to become more integrated.

Those of us of an older generation have been brought up in a world where we hunker down and work solo on a high-focus task. Then we gather it into something we can share with others, either in a document or a meeting, or both. This approach to *focus+sharing* is changing in a number of ways.

High intensity focus work now often involves more than one person. This could involve coding in pairs, for example, or working on the same Microsoft or Google document or spreadsheet at the same time (as is now often the norm in project work, especially amongst people entering the workplace from college). It can be people working together in a breakout booth on the same screen, or with the parties involved working together remotely. Or one or two in the 'workplace', and others joining remotely.

Again, work that might previously have involved people analysing data separately in their spreadsheets, sending attachments (focus work), then having a meeting (collaboration), is now often replaced by people standing in front of a dashboard – or looking at it from remote locations – and analysing live data together, or making decisions on what to investigate and setting up an automated report.

We also bounce between different types of tasks. Those who are in the office/workplace will probably be doing a mix of tasks on their days there, i.e., some highly collaborative, some joint high-focus, and some concentrated solo work. So, the office is not only about collaboration, though the emphasis will be in that direction. We need good spaces in the collective workplace to focus (alone or jointly) as well as collaborate.

As we can see, collaboration and focus are increasingly interwoven. As such, generalisations about where they should be done are not especially helpful.

Noisy and demonstrative focus work

We should also note the changing ways we interact with technology for high focus work. We assume we want peace and quiet, an escape from the noise of other people when we focus. Increasingly, other people will want an escape *from us* when we focus.

Speech recognition is advancing in leaps and bounds. I know people who make extensive use of it when writing. Designated 'focus areas' within offices may soon become more like ancient or medieval libraries, where people mostly spoke the words aloud. Will we come to accept this, or do we need to rethink the spaces that we need? Or just send everyone home to focus as noisily as they like (and as their families will tolerate)?

That will not be the only change to how we focus. In our leisure time we are quite accustomed to gesture recognition for Wii and Xbox. Responsive screens and virtual reality-enabled working will bring this kind of interaction increasingly into offices. We'll need settings where it's safe, comfortable and permissible to wave our arms and generally lurch about, for example as we design

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and virtually manipulate new products or remote systems or learn how to do so. Again, we might ask, are these necessarily best performed in the collective workplace? We should not assume that they always are.

What does this mean for the design of the workplace?

The world has become suddenly populated by people who are expert in homeworking and best practices for virtual meetings. Unfortunately, most of the advice offered seems little different from what was being offered in the 1990s. Advice essentially revolves around the social and psychological constructs of traditional office working, and how remote workers can dovetail into the traditional practices and culture despite being somewhere else.

But this is the wrong way round. It's the world of the traditional workplace that needs to adapt fast to catch up with more modern and distributed ways of working.

We need to start by deconstructing the word 'remote' when applied to 'remote working'. We're looking at a world where the worker in the collective workplace may often be significantly outnumbered by his colleagues who are working elsewhere. In this instance, that worker in the office or lab is just as remote as any of his or her colleagues.

This is a salient fact to take on board when thinking about the design of workspaces. What we need is a further evolution of activity-based working design that starts from the premises:

- **Remote working is the norm**, not an exception, and space must be designed to facilitate frictionless working with those working elsewhere.

- **Where people work off-site is just as important** as where they work on-site.

What this means in practice for the collective workplace is as follows:

- People need to have spaces where they can quickly jump onto calls and online meetings. Traditional meeting rooms are not well optimised for this more dynamic kind of use. Instead, a mixture of enclosed and semi-enclosed booths and bays, with close attention to the acoustic environment, will facilitate better this kind of '*everyone is equally remote*' interaction.

- There's scope for more creative approaches to collaboration spaces such as project rooms, training rooms and innovation spaces. Reconfigurability and the use of intelligent screens and surfaces are likely to be important, with excellent AV and acoustics for involving remote participants on an equal basis.

- People doing more hands-on types of work also need a mix of these kinds of spaces to work more seamlessly with colleagues, customers, partners and suppliers who are elsewhere, when there is a need to do that.

- The centrality of desks in planning new layouts needs finally to be consigned to history. Too many assessments of workplace requirements start from prioritising desk use and desk ratios, and then dividing up the rest of the space into other (implicitly less important) activity-based settings. Instead, the range of spaces as a whole needs to be considered, including a range of options (spaces, surfaces, screens) for focus work which may also support focusing together with people who may be either on-site or elsewhere.

- There's also a need to be wary of any methodologies that are based on assumptions around existing office practices, e.g., specifying the need for certain teams to be closely located in order to collaborate, based on pre-2020 communication practices, or using sensors to monitor (and artificial intelligence to analyse) who collaborates with whom *in the building*. In the emerging world of work, there will be a lot more fluidity both in collaboration and mobility beyond the building for most kinds of work. I look forward to advances in methodologies that also factor in virtual 'beyond-the-office' interactions to workplace design.

So, the key point is that every aspect of the design of workplaces need to be rethought to take account of the interactions with the wider '*workplace beyond the workplace*'.

But that's not the end of the story for the workplace industry. We also need to address those other workplace settings in a much more focused way.

What are homes for?

As well as asking '*What is the workplace for?*' we now need to ask, '*What is the home for?*'

As we move beyond the Industrial Age and its separation of employment and residential premises, homes are becoming increasingly important centres of economic activity. Yet very few are designed with work in mind. The trend has been to build smaller and smaller homes, with primary focus being on the number of homes and their location rather than their purpose in the 21st century.

Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott examine the prospect in their book, *The 100 Year Life[ix]*, of our having several careers over the course of a longer, multi-stage life. This would see periods of working interwoven with times when we re-skill ourselves or just do other things that interest us. This may include periods of employment interspersed with periods of self-employment or starting a venture in a field we are passionate about.

It's important to note here that home-based work is not just about knowledge work. A very large number of home-based businesses and start-ups are in fields like crafts, textiles, food preparation, retail and therapies. In both the UK and the USA, over 70% of start-ups begin life at home[x]. And increasingly entrepreneurs are choosing not to move to separate premises as their business grows. There are companies with over a thousand employees and hundreds of thousands of dollars turnover

that are entirely, or almost entirely, home-based. Businesses that start in the garage may well stay in the garage, so to speak (albeit a smarter one as funds allow).

Many businesses, freelancers and independent contractors use their home as a base while working in multiple places. This kind of work cuts across sectors, and some people such as musicians, peripatetic teachers, therapists, landscapers, and event organisers need good spaces for developing their services and to prepare work they take elsewhere, as well as for administration, marketing or collaborating with partners.

The kind of space required varies according to the type of work being undertaken. So, it's not a question of designing home workplaces on a 'one size fits all' basis. Nor is it the case that people working from home are essentially working on their own. They will often be working virtually with other people throughout the day – and sometimes in person in their homes too.

So, there is a challenge here for the workplace industry – to specify, design and support great places to work within domestic environments.

These are some of the types of spaces needed for different kinds of homeworking:

- **Office** – for primarily knowledge work, with good ergonomic set-up, adjustable-height desk, multiple screens, capacity for big wall-mounted screen for communication if needed, comfortable alternative places to sit away from a desk (e.g. to read, watch broadcasts, participate in less formal meeting etc.)

- **Workshop** – room with sufficient space for fabrication, whether high tech or in traditional crafts, with space for storage as needed.

- **Comms room** – space for more immersive collaboration, potentially with space and surfaces for 3D holographic work and participation in project or innovation work with distant colleagues. Could also be used for home-based learning.

- **Sound-proofed studio** – for music rehearsal and teaching, and audio or video production or broadcast.

- **Treatment room** – for those in health and beauty occupations, which may have requirements for patient privacy, safety (etc) as well as enough space for treatment chairs or tables and specialist equipment.

- **Food and drink preparation area** – this could be a larger kitchen, or a dedicated space for preparation and packaging/bottling for distribution.

- **Shop front** – for homes in town centres or in local centres, a space fronting onto the street e.g. a workshop or studio in which customers can be met and products ordered or sold.

These are just some of the kinds of spaces that would be appropriate. They could be within a house, or annexe, or separate building in the garden or courtyard. There are plenty of precedents – we've just tended to ignore them during the industrial era.[xi]

How should the workplace industry respond?

At this time, spaces for home-based working are being left to residential architects or developers who generally do not have the experience or insights of workplace specialists. In the past it may have seemed there is not enough work in this area to make it worthwhile to develop a home-workplace specialism. But in the emerging world of work there are many potential opportunities.

Where there are opportunities at scale is in the building of new settlements. In the UK there are plans to build three million new homes over the next decade. The workplace industry should be heavily involved in challenging the existing models of off-the-peg housing estate design and creating exciting alternatives that address the new world of work and the longer multi-stage careers people will have. So, we need to influence planners and work closer with residential architects and developers so that the work-homes that are needed are built in sufficient quantity to meet the needs for flexible domestic economic activity.

This also means taking a strong lead in the design of community facilities, including high street coworking spaces, to enable quality spaces for work in public indoor and outdoor spaces too.

We need also to ensure there are design standards in place to produce quality home-work settings. It's all about creating great places to work, wherever people are working in the wider workplace.

There is also a role for employers in stretching facilities management beyond the traditional workplace. During the pandemic we saw people sent home to work and having a laptop stand or screen sent to them on request (or not). This kind of approach is not at all sufficient.

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We need to look now at having a hospitality approach to FM in the office that integrates IT and FM support to ensure everything runs smoothly for a more transient workforce. And then this needs to be extended beyond the office to people working elsewhere to ensure they have everything they need to facilitate frictionless virtual working with maximum comfort and ergonomic excellence.

The mindset shift – workplace as derived demand

All this requires a mindset shift. For people in the industry, the workplace is the focus of their attention. And this is typically conceived of being a large space for collective working, or a series of such places.

For everyone else who uses them, the workplace is a derived demand. Their focus is on their work objectives, and the workplace is a means to an end. We like to talk about workplace productivity, and try in various ways to define it. It's elusive, because workplaces themselves are not productive. They can support people (or machinery) maximising their productivity or be a barrier to it. And for an ever-increasing number of people, the most 'productive office' for the activities they do is the one they don't have to go to. What is needed in this context is a shift in focus to design and provide services for people wherever they happen to do the work.

The traditional collective workplace is set to carry on shrinking, as technology and individual aspiration stretch the workplace to wherever it is needed. It's well past time, then, for workplace specialists to think outside their ever-shrinking boxes and, as work becomes reintegrated with the rest of life, to address the implications of the wider social infrastructure of work.

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[ii] The UK government, for example, has mandated all central government departments and agencies to meet a standard of Smart Working by June 2022, as set out in the British Standards *PAS3000 (2015) – Smart Working Code of Practice*.

[iii] There have been numerous large-scale surveys during the lockdown that point to this conclusion. These include: The Leesman survey cited above; Global Workplace Analytics & Iometrics, *Global Work-from-Home Experience Survey*, May 2020; Eurofound, *Living, Working and Covid*, 2020; Boston Consulting Group, *Remote Working and the Platform of the Future*, 2020

[iv] Office for National Statistics, *Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK.* April 2020

[v] *Rolls-Royce robots promise maintenance revolution*, in The Engineer, July 2018. https://www.theengineer.co.uk/rolls-royce-robots-maintenance/

[vi] *Repairs on high: engineering innovation in aircraft maintenance*, in The Engineer, September 2019. https://www.theengineer.co.uk/repairs-on-high-engineering-innovation-in-aircraft-maintenance

[vii] The otherwise useful Boston Consulting Group study mentioned above goes down this cul-de-sac, seeing "rotation dynamics" and "role allocation" being necessary responses to hybrid working.

[viii] Leesman Index, *op cit*, and Global Workplace Analytics, *op cit*, provide data supporting this split, reflecting current assumptions about the need for in-person collaboration.

[ix] Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott, *The 100 Year Life – Living and Working in an Age of Longevity*, 2017, Bloomsbury Business.

[x] Lake, A. 7 Dwelly, T, It's Work But Not As We Know It, available for download at www.flexibility.co.uk

[xi] For an excellent and illustrated global survey of different kinds of 'workhome' environments, check out Frances Holliss book *Beyond Live/Work: The Architecture of Home-based Work*, 2015, Routledge. For examples of live/work premises and case studies, see *Tomorrow's Property Today*, a study for a group of UK government agencies and the Royal Town Planning Institute by Tim Dwelly, Andy Lake and Lisa Thompson (available to download from https://flexibility.co.uk/resources/).

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