The Emerging City Workscape: Propositions for Sydney

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Introduction

For 40 years the global consultancy DEGW, now the Strategy+ practice at AECOM, has explored the changing nature of work and its impact on the city. This paper highlights a number of frameworks developed by the firm through sponsored research and case studies prepared in the course of developing workplace strategies for a wide range of global space users. It distills a paper prepared by one of the authors (Laing) published in 2013 as a survey of working environments for the technology sector in New York City.[1] The focus here shifts to city-making in Sydney, where space users are rapidly adopting the first of five propositions summarised here, namely that they should be demanding better performance from smaller real estate portfolios.

Theories of work and the city

Information technology is ending the industrially based culture which underpinned the nature of urban development and the formal spatial logic of the modern city. It is overturning the two great 'iron laws' of twentieth century work and the office buildings and cities that were built to accommodate them: the synchrony and the collocation of work activities.[2]

By the end of the twentieth century, the patterns of use of information technology by knowledge workers had broken down the strict synchronicity of work associated with a central office building and its collocation of functional activities in a standard 9-5 pm working day. The older centralised patterns of office work had been intended for increasingly obsolescent face-to-face supervision of clerical tasks that depended on paper files and archives. Knowledge work now increasingly involves not only face-to-face collaboration with multiple teams but also wider distributed virtual collaboration with many teams in remote locations. The scale of global enterprises has also resulted in more work taking place across multiple time zones.

Evidence of the disintegration of what DEGW founder Frank Duffy calls the Taylorist model of office work and office design, and of the reality that work has now in a sense escaped from the box of the office building (or, at least, escaped from the individually assigned desk or personal office) are the data from global observational studies showing that for an average organisation, workspaces of all kinds are only occupied 42 per cent of the typical day.[3]
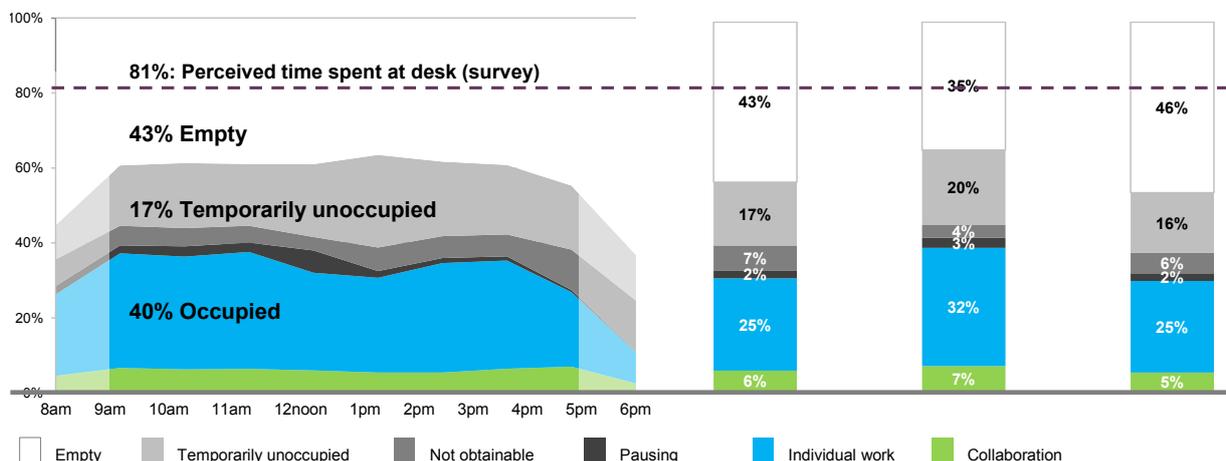

Fig 1. Space utilisation studies in Australia align with global findings: most desks are unoccupied for most of the day

The networked office

Duffy proposes an alternative typology that he calls 'The Networked Office' to describe these new ways of working that came into being with late twentieth century knowledge work supported by ubiquitous networked information technology. In "Work and the City", published in 2008, he describes how the Networked Office has eroded all of the spatial and temporal conventions of twentieth century work, as mobility and ubiquitous technological connectivity mean that 'the office' is no longer a stable entity of place, given that work can be carried in multiple kinds of places.[4]

The office building, he concludes, no longer holds a monopoly on accommodating office work, and the office building is therefore now a misleading unit of analysis.

This multiplicity of the locations of work complements the plural nature of knowledge work, as work itself escapes organisational boundaries. The essential character of knowledge work is in developing, communicating and sharing ideas, and this reinforces its communal rather than solitary characteristics. The routine individual tasks of office work are increasingly automated (and then outsourced or offshored) while solitary intellectual tasks can be carried out in many other places besides the office.

The arguments in favor of more flexible or nomadic work patterns involving some telecommuting and mobile working are powerful. For many, the optimal solutions are those that enable workers to blend their work lives and their home lives, to take advantage of both the home and the office (or, increasingly other intermediary or 'third' places) as settings for different tasks at different times of the day or week.

AECOM research in 2013 consistently highlights Australian workers' strong desire to shift to a hybrid model – more that 90 per cent of respondents want to work from home at some point.[5]

Findings suggest that such workers gain better work-life balance, are more productive, can concentrate better and experience reduced stress and commuting times. The environmental benefits of less travel are significant. Flexible ways of working also enable office buildings to be used more intensively, as workspace is used on a shared, as-needed basis, a major environmental benefit.

Duffy argues that this Networked Office transcends the boundaries of conventional architecture to take advantage of 'entirely different kinds of relationships between technology and people and between time and place'.[6] In so doing, these new ways of working and using space provide three major advantages: knowledge work is more compatible with other activities; buildings and cities can be used more effectively; and, cities are more sustainable.

The persistent value of cities in a virtual world

Far from claiming that information technology is eroding the value and purpose of cities, or reducing the significance of place in a virtual world, many theorists, economists and policy makers are proclaiming the persistent irreplaceable qualities of cities as drivers of economic growth, creativity, and innovation—even as information technology enables ubiquitous virtual connectivity.[7]
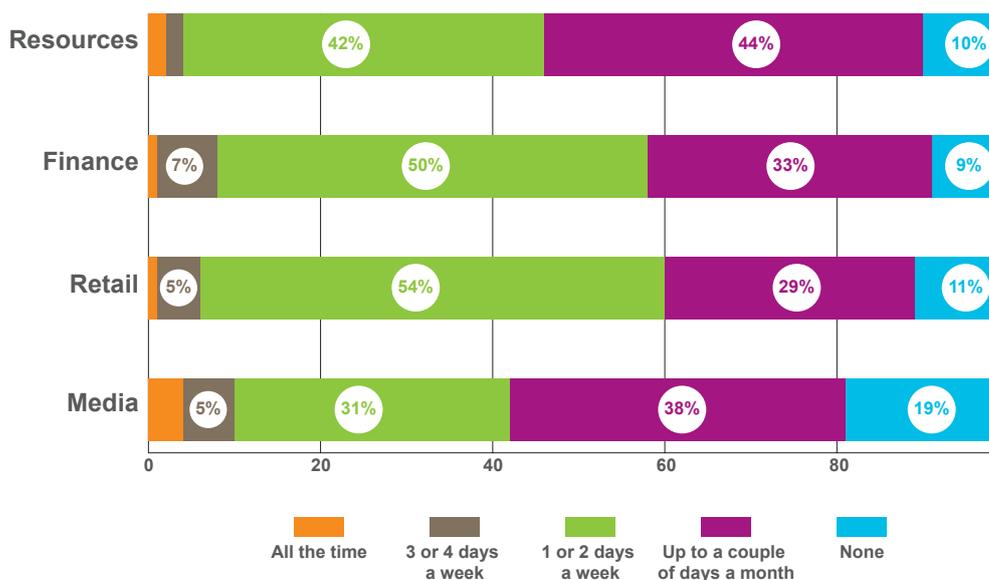

Fig. 2. Working away from the office– asking 4000 Australians in 2013 how often they would like to work from home
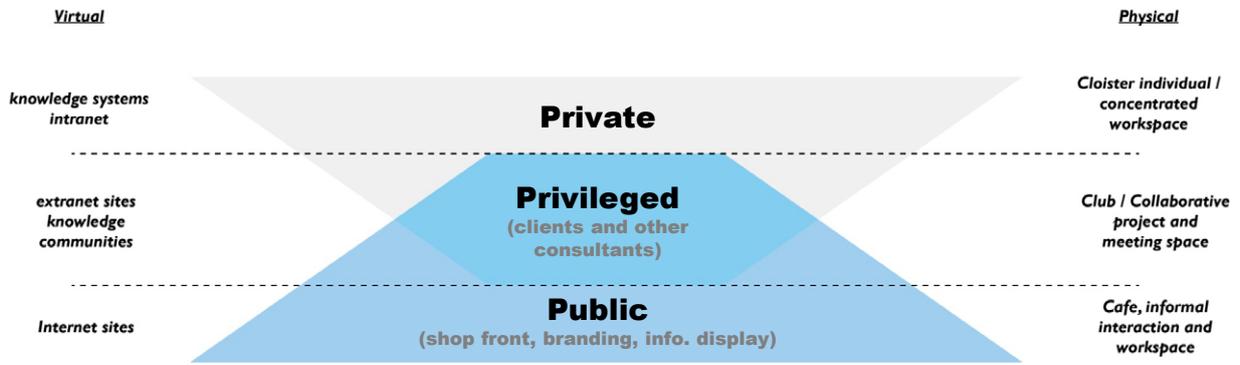
Fig. 3. Private, Privileged and Public Workscapes

With big data offering new insights into user behavior gleaned from GPS coordinates, we see that virtual interactions and face-to-face interactions reinforce one another. Much of the value of dense urban work environments comes from unplanned meetings. Information technology creates a more relationship-intensive world and reinforces the fundamental purpose and logic of the city as an intellectual catalyst and dynamo of growth. In a sense, technology is enabling us to rediscover what Duffy has called the intellectual potential of cities, as he noted the 'apparently contradictory phenomenon that city life is also becoming increasingly networked perhaps even more intensely but at a much more local scale. Virtuality seems to be complementary to physicality.'[8]

Larger firms want to intensify the opportunities for networking knowledge and ideas in their own physical workplaces (to mimic the advantages of the richness of communications found in smaller organisations), while the contingent peripheral workforce and smaller organisations are also seeking workplaces to connect and collaborate in. There is therefore a mutual interdependency between the larger firms and the periphery of smaller firms and individual contributors, with both seeking to use combinations of virtual and physical networks to be successful.

The workscape vocabulary

A new vocabulary of networked places and activities is emerging in our work to meet these changing demands. It is a language that describes different work styles and degrees of mobility; of 'anchors' versus 'residents'; of the 'super-mobile' versus the 'mobile'. It is a language that defines types of places for 'concentrated' versus 'collaborative' work, and deals with the fact that knowledge workers are themselves defining where, when and with whom they do they work. The vocabulary recognises that the knowledge worker in the networked world of work is making choices about the relative values of virtual and physical activities and forms of 'presence' according to their changing needs. Users are choosing the degree of permeability and access they want for their work environments.

One way of describing this distributed workplace of many different kinds of settings is as a landscape of work: this concept of a 'workscape' was developed by DEGW in the early 2000s.[9] Even as work has become mobile and distributed, physical work environments remain a vital part of an organisation's infrastructure. The question is how to optimise the range and variety of work environment for a dispersed workforce in a less location-centric approach? Harrison and others suggested a model with a parallel layering of virtual and physical spaces in terms of their degrees of accessibility and of user or corporate control and the degrees to which they are private, privileged or public.[10] (see Figure 3)

Fig. 4. The Evolving Program of the Office Building

The model recognises the shift towards creating a flexible, variable cost model for space and real estate, where space is acquired on an as-needed basis rather than being provided only as a long-term lease or asset purchase. New business models and service providers are rapidly developing in the privileged zone.

The impacts of new ways of working and using space that we have described are both quantitative and qualitative. Less space is required by the organisation overall, as staff work remotely part of the time and share space in a flexible way facilitated by their mobility within the office for the balance of their time. The range of spaces used within the workplace is also changing, from a predominance of individual private offices, workstations or cubicles, to increased proportions of shared support, project and collaborative spaces and meeting rooms of many different kinds used in more flexible, itinerant ways. The total amount of space allocated to individual work is reduced and the total allocated to collaboration is increased. The logic of new ways of working and using technology is that workspace can be used more intensively and in more varied patterns of overlapping uses that share spatial assets over time.

This logic can apply at scales larger than the individual organisation's workspace, to whole buildings and urban areas. It suggests that buildings can be used by a greater variety of functions and activities that are less homogeneous. It also suggests that as work—and all other activities supported by networked technology—spills out of the conventional office space, that the space in-between buildings becomes part of the programmable area of 'workspaces' in this new sense. The wider urban area becomes part of the program of workspace. (See Figure 4)

From a developer, landholder, or owner's perspective, this approach is also one that mitigates the risk of the large scale mono-functional office building, with its preponderance of single user tenant or occupiers all using space in the same way, with little opportunity for change or diversity in tenant types and patterns of use.[11] These monolithic buildings and areas lack the resilience and sustainability provided by mixed-up activities and varied patterns or scales of use that allow for change over time. The resulting monoculture is becoming a misguided strategy – in the same way that mono-agriculture might have created high crop yields initially, but ultimately stripped the land of its fertility, resilience and life.

If we take this pioneering approach of a landscape of work, or a workscape, we can explore the emerging characteristics of the design and architecture of the spaces, buildings, and even urban areas, to support these different kinds of organisational needs and patterns of work that we have identified in the privileged zone – the area of most innovation and programmatic diversity. The concept of a privileged workscape is gaining in significance relative to the entirely public or private models of space use in the workscape. The privileged zone:

– Features an emerging typology of workplaces and working commons: Co-working, Open Houses, Cohabiting.

– Supports collaborative consumption of space and workplace as a service.

– Thrives in a connective and permeable urban architecture of hybrid mixed use buildings and districts.

The emerging typology of shared workplaces is further evidence of the growth of a new economic model where ownership and access are shared. Office space can now be consumed collaboratively in the same way that we now rent cars or movies. Underpinned by technology and mobile devices, these new service models thrive when they tap into the deeper societal driver for community.

This shift to a consumerist model of workspace provision is a significant alternative to the conventional supply chain of twentieth century office development which is anchored in the real estate conventions of long term leasing or ownership of office.
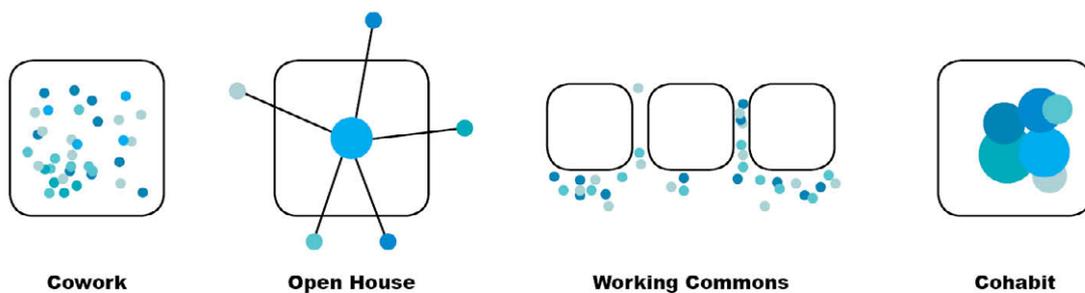

Cowork   Open House   Working Commons   Cohabit

Fig. 5. The new typology of privileged workspaces

Co-working

Co-working spaces provide a range of workspaces with shared services usually paid for within a nominated membership basis – either by the minute, the day or the month. Individual workspaces may be assigned or unassigned. They are usually managed in a participatory way that encourages a sense of community where individuals and small groups share ideas and mutually support each other's work. Different co-working spaces cater to different kinds of communities; some are geared towards specialised fields or sectors, others offer a nurturing environment for start-ups and can offer access to mentors and investors.[12] All provide company for freelancers and a base for nomads.[13]

Corporate organisations are also encouraging their own employees to work in co-working spaces as an alternative to their regular workspace, not to save on costs primarily, but to facilitate their interaction and knowledge sharing with others and to and inspire creativity from a new, and often more informal and relaxed setting.

Open House

Aside from the large number of different kinds of co-working spaces, there is a related trend for organisations to open up their own workspaces to a wider community and to invite others in to share in their work space. We have defined this kind of environment as an 'Open House'. This can happen on an individual basis, e.g. making excess workspace available for short term use via LiquidSpace.[14] Areas of the organisation are also being developed to provide an environment that brings people into the office. NAB's new offices at 700 Bourke Street in Melbourne are offering potential clients, suppliers or partners tempoarary work space in 'The Village' to connect, learn and work alongside NAB community members and business specialists.[15]

Co-habiting

There is a further type of workspace in which, rather than the individual organisation opening up to others or to the wider community, several organisations together share a work environment with the purpose of gaining from each other's knowledge and experience. We have defined this kind of environment as 'Co-habiting'. Global precedents provide the best illustration of this workspace: Google in London is supporting a co-working space called Campus in which Google will occupy one floor and two others will be available for co-working.[16] In the US Steelcase is participating in a 'co-habiting' space called Grid70 in Grand Rapids with several other organisations.[17]

The Working Commons

Bandwidth is the precondition for a twenty-first century working environment. Since 2002, Bryant Park in New York City has provided free wireless access in the open space next to the City Library.[18] The link to a library is telling; university campuses are moving away from the traditional library model of providing space for quiet individual work to hosting the informal ad hoc collaboration of a learning commons. These facilities provide spaces to meet, study, make social connections and exchange ideas. Food and drink are welcome, furniture and equipment are mobile, access may be all hours and all space is effectively team space. Work settings change by the hour, day and week. Hub Central at the University of Adelaide covers 10,500sqm over three levels of space adjacent to the Barr Smith Library.[19]

The emerging role for local governments in cities, and in regional centres looking to keep local citizens challenged and stimulated closer to home, is to host the public spaces that animate and anchor communities. These spaces will be the working commons for all who participate in the city.

Propositions for the future

What are the implications of these trends in work and workplaces for how we think about future development places in Sydney? Our research suggests a series of propositions that may guide the future design and development of buildings, places and the city.

Underutilised assets are unsustainable – most desks are empty for most of the day. There are fundamental changes in the patterns of overall demand for workspace, which means that many workers no longer need to be collocated in office buildings on a regular daily basis. More intermittent patterns of occupancy of workspaces mean that organisations need to lease or own less space.

1.
Use less space

Photo Credit: SBS Agile Pilot Sydney, Nicole England Photography

As organisations render their office accommodation portfolio down to more a sustainable platform, we see them re-using, reinventing and transforming the workspace that they retain. They are creating 'Open Houses' in which the organisation opens up its workspace to collaborators, partners and clients. They are co-creating 'Cohabited' workspaces in which groups of businesses share environments and actively encourage the intermingling of their workforces. They are designing many kinds of Co-working spaces in which individuals and smaller organisations work together in communities.

2.
Share the space you have

Photo Credit: The Hub Westminster, London   http://www.architecture00.net/blog/?p=1796

But more than the invention of these more shared and collaborative workspaces of different kinds, organisations of all sizes will look to take advantage of the parts of the city that offer the greatest diversity of settings to engineer serendipity. Single-use business districts will not be able to compete with precincts that mix different scales of buildings and different kinds of work and non-work functions within buildings.

This suggests that workspaces should be planned alongside and linked to complementary functions and supporting activities, including living, educational, retail, entertainment and service spaces of many kinds. Workspaces should be designed as part of urban places in which the probability of many different kinds of interactions (i.e. social, intellectual, commercial, etc) are enhanced and facilitated.

Developments need to allow for managed degrees of accessibility within and between organisations. Given the widespread mobility in how people work, it can be assumed that work will also happen in semi-public and public spaces of different kinds. This suggests an architecture and urbanism that is physically networked and connected in complex and stimulating ways. Provide for layers of private, privileged and public access to these new kinds of workplaces.

3.
Look for precincts with permeable environments
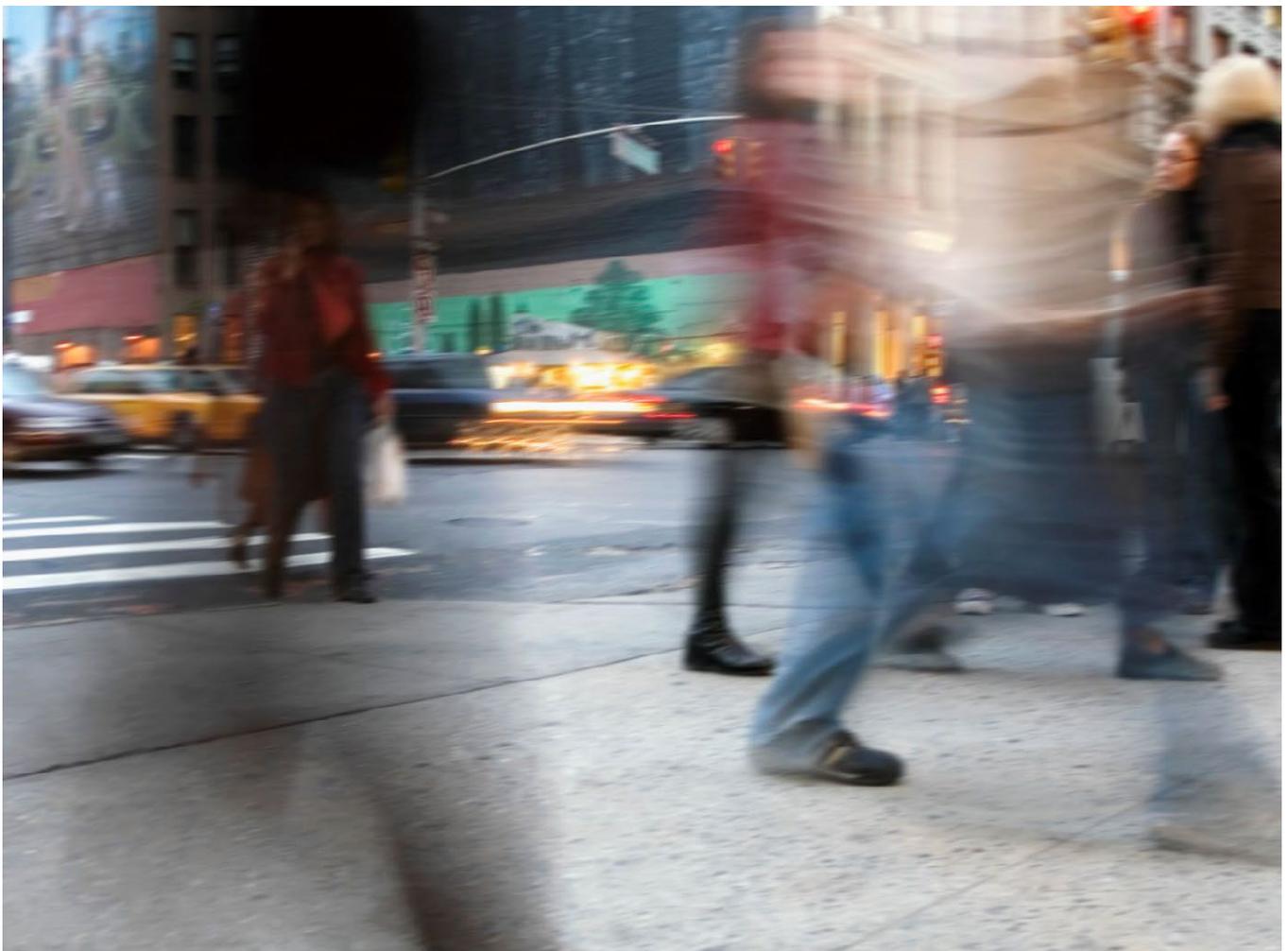
Celebrate the interstitial, in-between and peripheral spaces which serve as the mixing and socialising spaces between organisations and blur the boundaries between buildings and places. Allow for such spaces to support and mix up work, leisure, retail, culture, entertainment and educational activities. As mobile working is increasingly the norm, interstitial spaces increase in value as workplaces and as places of intersection and interaction within and between organisations.

As work breaks out of the boundaries of the conventional office workplace, organisations and individuals are seeking public and semi-public environments in which to meet and work collectively. Local governments have a role to plan for larger scale co-working spaces that extend beyond the office building type and provide a new kind of workspace typology – the working commons.

4.
Celebrate the in-between spaces

keep work loose

As work patterns are increasingly mobile and also often virtualised, organisations and individuals need to provide for events and activities that create community and awareness in physical places. Face-to-face activities in physical settings that are memorable and distinctive become more significant. Workspaces and urban settings need to be designed and managed to allow for many different kinds of curated special events: parties, lectures, pop-up experiences, meet-ups, and many other kinds of social, cultural and educational activities. The design of these environments needs to support rapidly changing programs of events, led or curated by different organisations and users.

Each of these five propositions has already emerged in Sydney. Organisations such as Macquarie Bank, the Commonwealth Bank and GPT have already shifted to new flexible working environments that densify space and re-invent new kinds of collaborative work settings.[20] Co-working hubs target freelancers, support internet start-ups or offer supplementary services to tenants or subscribers. The city actively celebrates and cherishes its laneways for a wide range of experiences.

Perhaps the most vivid example of a next-generation city workscape in Sydney is Customs House at Circular Quay. Here we find a rich mix of public and privileged space, anchored by a public library with reading rooms and meeting spaces, offering memorable dining experiences, wine and coffee around a fine city square. The square is curated with a sure hand so that the corporate displays do not displace the festivals of light, design and culture that make it the heart of Sydney City. Long may buildings and places of this quality grace our lives.[21]

5.
Plan experiences and events

Endnotes

1   Laing, Andrew. "Work and Workplaces in the Digital City" Centre for Urban Real Estate (CURE) Graduate School of Architecture Planning and Preservation of Columbia University. 2013.
http://www.arch.columbia.edu/centers/cure-center-urban-real-estate/publications

     This paper was originally delivered as part of the city-making stream of the 4th International Utzon Symposium, 7-9 March, 2014, Sydney Opera House
http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/utzonsymposium

2   Duffy, Frank. "Work and the City". Black Dog Publishers. 2008. p 46.

3   Data from 365 organisations, of 7,650,276 observations of workspaces, observed using AECOM's Strategy+ Space Utilisation Surveys.

4   Duffy, Frank. "Work and the City". Black Dog Publishers. 2008.

5   Surveys conducted by Strategy+ in 2013 of 4,000 employees in Australian companies across a range of sectors.

6   Duffy. 2008. p.49.

7   See for example, Glaeser, Edward. "The Triumph of the City". Penguin Press. 2011.

8   Duffy. 2008. p 55.

9   Harrison, Andrew, Wheeler, Paul and Whitehead, Carolyn. "The Distributed Workplace". Spon Press. 2004.

10   Harrison et al. 2004. p 44-45.

11   Duffy, Frank. "Lumbering to extinction" in Digital Field Harvard Design Magazine. 1-5 (fall/Winter 2009).

12   Co-working space and community of entrepreneurs http://fishburners.org/

13   http://hubaustralia.com/spaces/sydney/

14   35 workspaces for hourly or daily hire are currently available in Sydney, including the GPT Boardroom through searching the Liquid space website https://liquidspace.com/

15   The Village Terms of Use are accessible here: http://www.nab.com.au/personal/campaigns/the-village

16   http://www.campuslondon.com/

17   http://www.grid70.com/

18   http://www.bryantpark.org/plan-your-visit/wireless.html

19   http://www.adelaide.edu.au/hub-central/

20   Laing, Andrew. "Financial Services Firms: Banking on Big Design Changes". http://hq.construction.com/advice_opinions/0912_Financial_services_Firms.asp. HQ Magazine.

21   One level of Customs House is off-limits to the public. The missing element of the workscape is a co-working space that all Sydney-siders can participate in as they need. We hope that when the lease for Level 3 is renegotiated in 2016 that the City of Sydney looks to prioritise users who will enrich the alternatives for the whole community.

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