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# BOF



**Shared Spaces and Flexibility are Vital for  
the New Hybrid Workplace**





Anthem Technology Center, Atlanta

## Shared Spaces and Flexibility are Vital for the New Hybrid Workplace

FURNITURE HAS TAKEN A MASSIVE LEAP IN RECENT YEARS, WITH MANUFACTURERS CREATING FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT A HYBRID WORKSPACE.

by Emily Clingman

**P**re pandemic, global real estate service provider JLL stated that [30% of office inventory](#) could be flexible by 2030 due to “insatiable levels of tenant demand.” Today, with all the changes that the pandemic brought to the workplace, flexibility will be critical as employees return to work.

Danijel Pocanic, Regional Design Leader at NELSON Worldwide, says that employees can expect to share everything when they return to work. This idea of “shared everything” will become a commonality as the needs of employees change daily. Spaces must become flexible to accommodate employee needs, whether

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this means serving as a huddle room one hour or a quiet room the next.

When it comes to flexibility, do people really want to come back into the office at all, or do people want to return, but to flexible situations in the office?

“The answer is actually both are true,” Pocanic said. “Do we want to work in a hybrid fashion — both remotely and in the office? We’ve probably crossed that line already and it’s becoming a standard. But the more interesting thing is how to provide more flexibility in the office, and I see the role of design to be the bridge between the two worlds.”

Pocanic is confident the office environment will never return to an open layout. It just doesn’t work for a hybrid

office. In fact, it’s the opposite.

“It’s the scenario of neighborhoods that we are looking for,” he said. “There are many reasons for that. The first one is that we are using the office in a different way. Before we used to come in and do a lot of focus work and open stations could kind of support that, but in a really quiet and controlled environment.”

Now, people are doing heads down work at home and going into the office for collaboration.

The other reason neighborhoods are important for is creating a different mood of the office.

“And after a couple years of sitting at home and getting used to a different kind of comfort, the last thing you want to do







Danijel Pocanic

is walk into a big open space that's often empty, or maybe with just a few people," Pocanic said. "It just doesn't feel welcoming or comforting. So, one thing we like to do is break it into neighborhoods and give them character, give everyone an opportunity to feel a little closer to their colleagues but also even in a sense, so they don't feel like they are being thrown into this open uncontrolled area."

A neighborhood would be similar to a neighborhood in the city. It would be an area that's connected to everything else, but at the same time have its own character, a certain vibe — maybe because it's occupied by a certain department that has a specific way of working, or maybe because of the services and functions provided. Certain

neighborhoods could be quieter, and others could be really busy, like a vibrant neighborhood in the city where everyone comes together, gets coffee, where everyone wants to be seen. Another neighborhood could be where clients come in.

When it comes to big town squares, it's more important than ever to provide great food and great coffee — really focusing on the experience of feeling welcome and catered to. People aren't just there because they must be but because they want to be. They want to come in and spend some time together.

"That's why it's really important to break down the office into these little niches of space that everyone would like to come into," Pocanic said.

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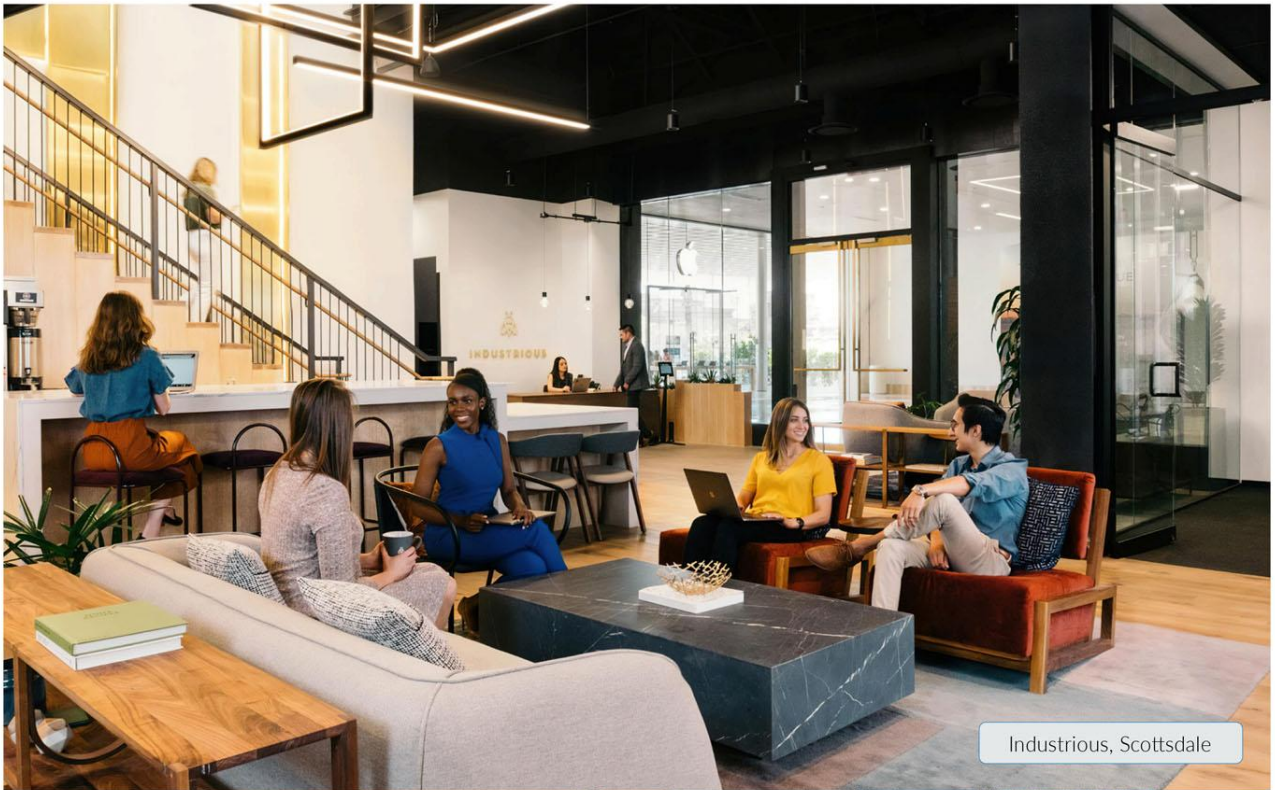


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Another aspect that's changing is the conference rooms and the private offices. Is the office hierarchy breaking down?

"There is a bit of a conflict in the idea," Pocanic said. "But the more we turn spaces flexible and shared and unassigned, in fact, the more personalization we're allowing because we're creating different destinations. By using technology or closing the door, spaces can be converted into multiple functions. So, directly speaking to the hierarchy, we have the biggest span of generations in the office than ever. In the past, people used to build their whole career to the window or corner office. Space meant status."

But now, influence is conveyed in a different way, he explains. The flexible office can still allow for those who need certain

types of spaces to naturally utilize them — an executive needs a certain conference room to meet clients, or an adjacent hospitality space, for example.

"But it doesn't have to necessarily be the corner office or a status symbol," Pocanic said. "A lot of executives we come across don't want it because they want to convey leadership in a completely different way."

They want to be present in the middle of the space. They want to be somewhere visible and reachable, rather than at the end of the corridor out of sight.

"There is a generational change in the mindset of how we understand leadership, and naturally the spaces are following," he said. "So, I'd like to underline that everything we are doing is not just a furniture solution



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or a design moment. It is a cultural, behavioral, change that’s merging with a design decision. It has to come together.”

Pocanic says the big message is that office spaces need to be flexible.

“We don’t have all the answers, we’re still testing behaviors,” he said. “So, the critical role of our design, especially with furniture, is to be flexible, especially in a way where you don’t have to commit to a solution or configuration. Essentially spaces need to work harder.”

As of lately, NELSON has been designing more collaborative spaces because the main purpose of the office is for people come meet with each other to exchange ideas, training, mentoring or teaming. The focus is utilizing elements and furniture that can be reconfigured directly by the end users.

“We need to be really empowering the end

user to move things around, not relying on heavy construction,” Pocanic said.

Private offices might be more like touch down spaces, to use for a day or a few hours. But when somebody is not occupying it, it needs to be available for meeting spaces. Furniture needs to support a little meeting room, and it needs to support a Zoom call.

“You need to configure that room to support all these things. The traditional private office layout doesn’t do any of that. It only does the focus work,” he said. “When you go into these rooms, it’s like your own little private universe, so these spaces are also like wellness spaces, where you take a moment for yourself. Maybe it’s designed with soft seating, where you feel like you’re at home, where you take a break from the ongoings of the office. I think that is where a lot of opportunities lie in reusing the spaces that we have.”



**What’s good, what’s lacking**

Furniture has taken a massive leap in recent years, with manufacturers creating flexible systems to support a hybrid workspace. What’s missing is the technology — they phygital presence — bringing people who are in and out of the office together in a meaningful way so they both feel seen and heard and are feeling that presence.

There are some solutions so far, including architectural solutions. But the office needs more of and the right kind of technology support — sound quality, lighting, advanced camera technology.

“It has to be like a little studio because you understand that you’re broadcasting,” Pocanic said. “Whatever is going on in reality in that room needs to be broadcast to other people and their presence needs to

be brought forward. So that kind of phygital presence needs to be worked on a lot. If you don’t have good technology, everything else fails. That’s really the critical aspect.”

Not every organization is ready for a full design and technology makeover. However, the beauty of hybrid work is it’s never one size fits all. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing. Adaptations can be made to try new ideas and designs, or to support transition periods while things are still in flux.

“We can accommodate these different levels and work with our clients to accommodate and find a comfortable spot,” Pocanic said. “But always with the awareness there are so many needs and preferences. If we can get the leadership to understand, that is a massive step forward.” **BoF**

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