Summary. Researchers argue that distributing workers throughout the city or region into smaller workspaces and giving them the chance to collaborate more with colleagues who live in close proximity could create several benefits. From a resilience perspective, this model...

The Covid-19 pandemic has abruptly challenged a decade of corporate real estate and workplace design decisions by calling into question the purpose of large centralized office locations. With many organizations maintaining work-from-home policies for the...
foreseeable future, we argue that now is an optimal time to plan for a post-pandemic workplace strategy by revisiting the conventional wisdom behind the centralized office. A more distributed model throughout cities and geographic regions, we believe, would better support employee performance and organizational resiliency while contributing to the improvement of the urban landscape and local communities.

Over the last several years, we have specifically looked at how office environments help people thrive at work. Thriving is defined as the joint experience of vitality and learning, and it is linked to better job performance, creativity, well-being, and more positive interactions among colleagues. It is also affected by office design. Well-designed meeting spaces can contribute to a culture of learning and knowledge sharing, while amenities, access to natural light, and other aesthetic features promote feelings of vitality.

Of course, thriving is also situational, and recent months, regardless of where one has been working, have introduced stressors that have undoubtedly made it more difficult for people to perform their best. Instead of thriving in work environments optimized for job performance, many people are now juggling working, caring for family members, and for some, home schooling from the same domestic space.

But despite the challenges associated with our “new normal,” individuals, organizations, and communities have also experienced benefits that will be difficult to turn back from. The air in major cities is cleaner. People don’t have to waste time commuting. Organizations are giving workers the flexibility they have long been seeking. We are optimistic about even more long-term benefits that can be realized if new planning and design principles are adopted.

Is the “Office” Going to Disappear?

The office is not going to disappear, but it will require a fresh, new approach. People will still need places where they can come together,
connect, build relationships, and develop their careers. The size, scale, and openness of the modern office can be detrimental to the quality of those relationships.

More than 40 years ago, in his studies of the nature of public life in cities and spaces, the sociologist Richard Sennett found that people in work settings need the freedom to distance themselves in order to maintain the quality of their social relationships. But as much as we need private places to go to when we seek separation, we also need public places to bring us together. Other research argues that we can only sustain 100 to 200 stable relationships before their quality begins to diminish. Collectively, these findings suggest that, if we want sustain our work relationships, and perform at our best, we need to revisit the scale and structure of our offices to better balance the levels of connectivity and distance among ourselves and our colleagues.

Beyond relationship building, offices matter for a host of other reasons. Both people and organizations use work settings as a means of expressing their values and aspirations. The design of physical places helps us express our professional identities. While ubiquitous virtual work is working — for now — many of us are still functioning from cultures, norms, relationships, and practices that were in place prior to the pandemic. If we wish to change or adapt any of those factors in the future, it will be difficult without some degree of physical presence. As a corporate CEO told us in a recent workshop, “You can’t change a culture over Zoom.”

**How Can We Design a Better Office Typology?**

As researchers and designers, we engaged in a design study exercise to imagine what a typical corporate organization would look like if a conventional headquarters was redistributed to a networked series of nodes throughout a city or geographic region at different scales. What would this new model entail? How could it improve city life? And how would those changes help organizations?
We argue that distributing workers throughout the city or region into smaller workspaces and giving them the chance to collaborate more with colleagues who live in close proximity could create several benefits.

From a resilience perspective, this model offers more options from where people can work in the event of disruptions like a natural disaster, a power outage, compromised infrastructure, or a major traffic disruption. From a business development perspective, it can bring organizations closer to their clients or customers — even offering options for co-locating with them. It can also bring businesses closer to job seekers or other talent pools.

Some large financial services companies based in New York’s financial district have, for instance, recently opened spaces for software and other tech-related operations closer to the city’s start-up community as a way to connect with it. This was the strategy behind Capital One Labs’ New York space, which is located away from Wall Street, in the heart of the Flatiron District. The space has helped them foster connections with the nearby tech community and attract talent.

In addition, a widespread organizational shift from offices that occupy large floors in a single building to a series of distributed nodes throughout multiple locations would result in more mixed-use office buildings that serve a more diverse cross-section of workers. We argue that this new typology would facilitate more high-quality connections, essential for strengthening existing teams and creating new relationships within and among organizations.

**What Would These Offices Look Like?**

One of the biggest changes to impact corporate real estate over the last decade has been the emergence and growth of coworking spaces, which provide smaller and more flexible shared office spaces with short-term leases to individuals and organizations. The total number of coworking spaces is growing, but it still represents only a small
fraction of corporate work spaces. (There are about 22,000
coworking spaces worldwide, serving about two million workers.) We
argue that coworking-like options are an exemplary model for what a
more distributed network of workspaces could look like.

One challenge of the traditional centralized office is that
interpersonal communication across floors and buildings is seldom.
We tend to communicate most with those who are within six feet of
us. Subdividing urban office buildings into smaller work units for
multiple businesses, with shared amenities, would help solve this
problem. More public-facing spaces would make the office more
inviting by allowing people to interact and build relationships across
units, or retreat to private work areas at their will.

In addition, mixing business offices with amenities such as event
spaces, restaurants, and gyms within commercial buildings would
allow these sectors to complement rather than compete with one
another. For example, bars could be placed at rooftop level to take
advantage of a building’s views while fitness spaces could be located
on a mezzanine or at mid-level to take advantage of larger floor areas.
This idea of thoughtfully distributing spaces and services throughout
one slice of real estate borrows from a strategy that has been used by
the hospitality industry over the past decade. Hotels combine
destination services like coworking space with retail, coffee shops,
and themed dining venues to attract visitors and locals alike. This, in
turn, increases the attractiveness of certain neighborhoods to
businesses offering complementary services.

Such adaptive reuse strategies can change the character of urban
neighborhoods, which has been the case in places like Downtown Los
Angeles, the far West Side of Manhattan, and Downtown Detroit. In
each of these areas, commercial vacancies have decreased and the
number of housing units has increased. We imagine an urban future
where these changes offer services, housing, and jobs for people
across the income spectrum so that cities ultimately do more to
support people in an equitable way.
The Evolution of Office Towers

Adaptive Reuse of Existing Commercial Buildings

In the buildings we have now, we can rethink the ways we are dividing multitenant floors.

We can create wider paths with open circulation and include pockets of space where amenities can be used by multiple tenants.

Blue-shaded area represents amenity space

Existing commercial buildings

Adaptive reuse

Future Commercial Buildings

With more diversity of tenants per floor, we expect foot traffic will increase in common corridors.

Future commercial buildings have the opportunity to create more functional shared spaces by scattering amenities throughout their buildings and developing vertical connections among floors.
The changes we are recommending for urban office towers have begun to appear in some suburban sites. When paired with rezoning strategies, suburban sites offer several possible adaptive reuse options. While urban office buildings complement the street life below them, suburban office buildings can be repurposed to create destination. This strategy would encourage people to use more single buildings for multiple purposes and reduce the need for them to drive among various sites.

The Bell Works site in Holmdel, New Jersey (Figure 2) offers an interesting template for this model. Formerly a two million square foot site housing AT&T Bell Labs in a relatively isolated suburban location, the site has been redeveloped as a mixed-use center with subdivided workplaces, coworking, retail, dining, and other community-oriented features. What was once a building for a single organization now houses more than 100 different companies in individual suites.

The site cultivates interdependencies among the user groups: office workers who can eat onsite, and shoppers who can attend events onsite. The space is now activated in a more balanced way, beyond core 9-to-5 business hours. To the point, approximately 25% of people who use Bell Works on a daily basis don’t work in the building. The site developer is opening a second location in suburban Chicago, which also incorporates a residential community into the spatial mix.
What Technologies Will These Spaces Require?

Even with clusters of people working together across a network of locations, the need to collaborate virtually will remain. The traditional, centralized office consists of meeting rooms of various sizes and capacities. In this model, someone dialing in virtually is at a disadvantage compared to their colleagues assembled in the same room. The remote worker presents as a voice on the phone or a window on a screen.

However, the pandemic has now neutralized virtual meetings. Everyone appears equally as a window on a screen. In the future, we imagine organizing meetings in a similar manner, using immersive technology to connect co-located clusters of participants more seamlessly and equitably with co-located clusters of their colleagues. A key feature of the decentralized office could be a hybrid conference room or broadcast center with virtual reality/augmented reality technology. (Figure 3).
Where Would These Spaces Be Located?

Today, individuals have more options available to them around where and when they do their work. Between the proliferation of coworking spaces and other wi-fi equipped public-facing spaces (coffee shops, libraries, lobbies, etc.), we have witnessed work packaged and sold as a consumer service. One benefit of consumerized work experiences is that they can follow their user base. With that in mind, we imagine a future where smaller scale, neighborhood-based workspaces can support organizations whose workers might live in close proximity to one another.

In large metro areas like New York, Washington, and Boston where commuting times are long but where co-presence with colleagues is still important, satellite offices or work clusters within shared coworking spaces could be incorporated into storefronts or other pedestrian-scale buildings. The concept of “workplace as a consumer service” would contribute to the possible tenant mix of small-scale buildings alongside ancillary services such as food and retail.

For organizations looking to consider this as part of their real estate strategy, we envision that the neighborhood-oriented workplace would function as a cultural hybrid of the traditional office and working from home. Working closer to home in one’s community
would reinforce an organization’s presence in a neighborhood through the agglomeration of workers in a local cluster, and help cultivate a sense of sociability among those workers.

We believe an important benefit of this strategy is its ability to reinforce organizational goals around health and wellness by lessening commuting times and encouraging people to walk or bike to work. Moreover, it would offer workers more flexibility, allowing hyper-local teams to choose a location based on their shared preference.

Finally, teams located close to their areas of residence inherit the benefit of creating mini cross-functional clusters that might not otherwise coalesce if people worked in a centralized office with single function work areas. Opening the door for workers to build these kinds of interpersonal connections would cultivate collaboration at a local geographic level.

Each of these social and spatial benefits increase the likelihood of teams thriving.
At a community level, a distribution of organizations throughout multiple locations can bring new life to obsolete spaces in both cities and suburbs. One of the effects of the pandemic is the shuttering of retailers and small businesses throughout communities. Left unchecked, the increase in retail and other storefront vacancies will leave a void in neighborhoods. Converting storefronts, defunct retail space (Figure 4), or other large buildings to office workspace can help revitalize struggling commercial districts in order to help ensure their vibrancy. This solution can happen at the pedestrian scale in walkable neighborhoods, and it can also work in car-centric cities by re-orienting buildings to enable greater walkability.

An example of this kind of transformation is the repurposing of a defunct department store on a busy commercial strip in Los Angeles into a mixed-use workplace with public-facing amenities at street level (Figures 5).
What About Working from Home?

One thing that the pandemic has demonstrated is the viability of home-based work for a wide range of industries and job roles. For some people or organizations, working from home is an option of last resort — something far less than desirable given the nature of personal or professional circumstances. For others, this experience has increased productivity, saved time, reduced costs, and minimized the consumption of resources.

In fact, many individual professionals recognize the long-term benefits of home-based work. Our recent study of a 700-person corporate headquarters revealed that 82% of employees would like to retain a work-from-home option when things return to normal. Company leaders also recognize the potential benefits, and many agree that some degree of remote working will likely remain as a long-term part of their workplace strategies.
We envision a future where home-based work remains a permanent option for many organizations and the people working within them but one that is integrated within a network of organizational spaces. Some organizations are already providing employees with stipends for setting up a home office space while recognizing that such an investment can be offset by lower long-term commercial real estate costs.

The disruption to the routines of office life have provided a learning opportunity for re-imagining the scale and design of the workplace. We all recognize the desire to get back to normal. The experience of working from home has equipped a larger share of the workforce with the tools needed to thrive in a post-pandemic landscape that could bring positive change to our cities, communities, and professional lives.

PB

Peter Bacevice, Ph.D. is Director of Research at HLC, a global architecture, design, and strategy firm, based in New York. He is also a Research Associate in Management & Organizations at the University of Michigan, Stephen M. Ross School of Business.

JM

John Mack, AIA, FIIDA is a Senior Partner at HLW and serves as the firm’s global head of design.

PT

Pantea Tehrani is Design Director for the New
Mat Triebner is an Associate Principal and Director of Strategy at HLW. He also lectures in the Urban Studies program at Yale University.