

A new generation of furniture such as this from Sedus is blurring the lines between offices and social spaces





One of the key ingredients of working culture and one that is nearly always cited by people as essential, is also a basic commodity

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Always the coffee



In 2019, the BBC published a piece on its website to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of Ridley Scott’s movie *Alien* and consider what it could tell us about modern office life. One of the interesting points raised in the piece was how the depiction of the workplace conditions on board the spaceship *Nostromo* did away with the gloss and swish of previous visions of the future, replaced by grime, exposed services and strictly utilitarian interiors. The environment was one of the characters, a trick Ridley Scott later repeated in *Bladerunner*.

“*Alien*, it is often said, is a Freudian film about sex and reproduction and the fears that come with them. But it’s also

about the camaraderie and irritation that come with being stuck in a confined space with your fellow staff members. It’s about the pecking order, the salary disputes, the grumblings about canteen food, the remarks about who is sitting in whose favourite chair. And it’s about the coffee – always the coffee.”

Always the coffee. It’s an interesting observation because it illustrates how important such issues are for the way people perceive their working lives and the cultures of the places in which they work. Things may have moved on since 2019, but then again, there’s always the coffee.

Ask office workers what they look for in an ideal working environment and three items that will be close to the top >

of the list, as they were pre-pandemic, will be comfort, good coffee and reliable WiFi. What the best working environments offer to deliver this trinity is a combination of work, interaction and relaxation that makes the space both more attractive and productive. It's a conduit for many of the most desirable objectives for the organisations, including personal wellbeing, recruitment and retention, serendipity, the development of relationships and the exchange of information.

In fact, the more general research into such issues backs up the idea that what most people want from their working environment is pretty straightforward. They want daylight, fresh air, rest, hygiene, flexibility, control, comfort, heat, socialisation and coffee.

These might be basic needs, mostly free at the point of delivery, but it often takes a sophisticated approach to the culture, design and management of a workplace to offer them to people.

When you ask people what they really want from an office space, most surveys come back with tellingly similar answers linked to their comfort, surroundings, privacy, control, nearby amenities, and refreshments.

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Ask people what they look for in a workplace and three items that will be close to the top of a wish list will be comfort, good coffee and reliable WiFi

What each of these factors share in common is that they represent a very basic human need. They also fit more or less neatly into two categories; comfort and a place to interact with other people, especially over a cup of tea or coffee.

This is marked by growing demand from occupiers for offices that improve their day to day experiences and offer a more service focussed approach to the design of the workplace.

This is one of the most important characteristics of the so-called flat white economy, largely made up of businesses

in the digital and creative sectors and, by no coincidence, one of the key drivers of innovation and economic growth as well as one of the most talked about in terms of the changing world of work.

The use of this name to describe the UK's small and startup creative and digital businesses is telling.

It more than hints at the idea that such businesses need to cluster in specific places to share ideas and gain access to the networks of power formed by giant firms but cannot afford the excessive rents that often go hand in hand with this hothousing.

Instead, they revert to coffee shops and ultimately coworking spaces that ape many of the aesthetic and functional characteristics of the café, especially the way such spaces can bring together people from disparate disciplines and professions to talk, share ideas and come up with new ones, a process that has been ongoing for over three hundred years.

Having grown their businesses in such surroundings, it's no surprise that they expect to take the features of the spaces and cultures that have nurtured them so well into the places they call home as their business grow larger.



Below left
The offices of Westpac at Parramatta Square, Sydney designed by GroupGSA

Below
The Westpac office now shares both the aesthetic and function of a cafe



There is nothing new in any of this. The first London coffee house was opened in 1652 by a Greek merchant called Pasqua Roseé who had grown fond of the drink while trading in Turkey, although a previous coffee house had opened in Oxford.

Fifty years later, Britain's nascent coffee culture was in full swing, although King Charles II had attempted to crush them in 1675, concerned about the free exchange of political thought they fostered.

Writers, journalists, artists and anybody who wanted to share in their thoughts would gather in places like Buttons coffee house near Covent Garden. Buttons featured a white marble lion's head into which people would deposit their stories, thoughts and poems which were published in a weekly newspaper digest.

By the beginning of the 18th Century, there were hundreds of similar cafes all over London. They all shared certain characteristics, including ready access to information, newspapers, ideas and the thoughts of a wide range of people who would declaim on a variety of subjects. Many of these features were described in the diaries of Samuel Pepys. >

The coffee houses became hotbeds of innovation. The first stocks and shares were traded in a London coffeehouse, Britain's insurance industry was formed in Lloyds coffee house, Isaac Newton and his contemporaries frequented the coffee houses near the Royal Society and in 1754, the RSA was established in a coffee house called Rawthmells, a tradition the RSA continues to this day with the naming of the café at its offices just off the Strand.

What drove the rapid growth of such places were exactly the same forces we see in the creation of cafés, agile office designs and coworking spaces today. It is the creation of a community of people who can come together in a shared experience. Having good coffee doesn't hurt that experience.

One of the most obvious outcomes of the convergence of our working and non-working lives is the way that work has taken over coffee shops at the same time that cafes and coworking spaces are invading retail and hospitality spaces. The number of hotels offering coworking >

space is growing rapidly in response to demands from guests and other digital nomads.

It is essential that modern office designs create a great experience for employees and visitors and also offer people a sense of community. This is not just good for the employee but also the business, as it is essential that people work in proximity to each other at times so they can share information, create ideas and feel part of a shared goal.

So, one of the most important questions the 21st Century organisation must ask itself is; when people can work from anywhere, how do we make the office the best possible choice? And the answer is to create a working environment that meets their needs better than anywhere else.

Consequently, one of the most important characteristics of the best office designs is the way they create a sense of community and the sort of experience that people now demand from their workplaces, including shared spaces and a place to share both ideas and information with colleagues over a drink or some food. In addition, there is

also a social aspect to work that must be reflected in the design of spaces.

The best office designs allow people to network, collaborate and engineer serendipitous encounters with each other. Because they are based on an agile working model which encourages people to find the most appropriate space for the task at hand and to meet their individual needs, they encourage movement and improve general wellbeing.

Many of these characteristics are apparent in a growing number of

workplaces and not just cafés and coworking space.

This demand is already having an effect on the place we used to refer to as the office and which now often resembles a home, hotel, café or airport lounge. This is manifesting itself not just in changing office design idioms but also the products on the market. Many of the displays at office furniture shows are now indistinguishable from those in the domestic and hospitality sectors.

In 1970, an anthropologist and researcher called William H Whyte decided to carry out a project looking at how people used spaces in cities. His innovation was to carry out the study as if observing tribes of people from other cultures. The focus of the study was how people interacted with social space.

Their findings were ultimately reported in a short book called *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* and a film, fragments of which are available online including one looking at the pleasures of being able to change seating arrangements. Facilities managers will recognise the behaviour from their own meeting and social spaces.

Below
The Heritage Lounge
at Argyll's St James
Square offices designed
by Damion Burrows



What became apparent to Whyte was that human interactions take place in ritualised and predictable forms and that the best spaces foster those interactions. Whyte writes about our tendency to engage with chance meetings in particular ways, to say goodbye as part of a ritual and our propensity to mirror the gestures of the people with whom we come into contact.

He also identifies the characteristics of the best social spaces including the proportion of sitting space to circulation space and the way we like different levels of light in a space. Crucially he also reports that if you want a space to be used, it should be stimulating and enticing.

Similar issues are addressed in the work of the sociologist Ray Oldenburg, who popularised the idea of the Third Space as a way of describing how we interact with people in shared places. The language he used has now been appropriated by office designers to describe the sorts of cafés and breakout spaces now used in workplaces.

It's common to hear people say that the boundaries between the traditional

workplace and the outside world have become blurred but it might be closer to the truth to say that in a growing number of cases they have been eradicated and that the evolution of cities and offices is informed by a two way exchange of DNA.

One of the interesting aspects of the work of both Oldenburg and White is how they anticipate our current interest in engineering serendipity in office design. This has important implications for workplace design, not least that there

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should be a greater focus on offering spaces that allow people to interact in spontaneous and unplanned ways. One way of achieving this is by aping the characteristics of ad hoc meeting spaces in other realms, including parks, cafés and benches.

The very best modern office design has absorbed the aesthetic and functional principles of café culture to create configurable elements that create adaptable, comfortable spaces. So, just as we choose and then adapt the right kind of space when we enter a café to work on a laptop, read, relax or share time with other people, a range of products exist that create the same dynamic in the workplace.

A work café doesn't have to be quiet but shouldn't be too noisy either. It can work in small and underutilised spaces, particularly where there are high levels of footfall, but can also work as a bigger space. It should also be available at all times to make the most of both the working day and the building itself. Most importantly it should be aligned to the needs of the people who work in the office ●



The design of the Westpac office typifies the new role of the office as a social space