Flexible work patterns to affect workplace designs

Classic Business, hosted by anchor Michael Avery on ClassicFM, invited Pete Greaves, Technical Director: Buildings, Aurecon; Jeff Robinson, Development Leader: Property, Aurecon; and Adrian Maserow of AMA Architects to participate in a panel discussion on the future of office environments...

Despite the huge volume of changes that people have seen in their personal lives because of technology, many workplaces have remained remarkably static. Employees still work in big, inefficient offices, sit in cubicles and work at the same desk and on the same computer each day.

The workplace of the future is going to be less centralised, more mobile and more flexible than the offices that we are seeing today.

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In the past, people outside of the freelance economy were unlikely to have a day-to-day work life that allowed them to work at coffee shop or the office but this is increasingly becoming the case and it is one of the key drivers behind the changing needs of office buildings and the related buildings services.

Creating liveable, sustainable workplaces and precincts requires a collective effort from designers, architects, engineers, consultants, companies and government.

Flexibility, adaptability

Peter Greaves

"Flexibility and adaptability are the key drivers of the change in workplace design. The workforce is changing, teams are changing and businesses are changing. People work from different locations and do not need a dedicated desk in an office. Workplaces of the future have fewer desks and more areas that are communal. People also tend to move around the office more in order to share knowledge, so the workplaces of the future need to have multiple spaces to accommodate this interaction," says Greaves.

"Flexibility is needed to accommodate changing business plans and teams within a company and the wider industry in which the company operates. An office is the framework where this can happen, but it needs to be flexible enough to change with an organisation," comments Maserow.

Workplaces are very much about collaboration and transparency. Some companies have

foregone the idea of individual offices completely.

"Companies want spaces where they can put teams together so that they can share knowledge. For example, there are more quiet rooms where employees can concentrate, areas that have been designed to encourage freethinking and creativity, and facilities where screen-based knowledge can be shared. A whole range of different kinds of spaces are becoming the norm now," says Robinson.

Demanding better work environments

The change in density of office workers also has an impact on the building services that are required. More cooling, for example, will be needed in higher density office spaces.

"As design engineers, we love solving these types of challenges. People are demanding better quality spaces, fresh air, lots of daylight and environments that are more comfortable. It changes the way in which we design basic systems. We're also bringing more gardens into the indoor and optimising how people use the building," says Greaves.

The Department of Environmental Affairs' new head office in Tshwane was recently awarded a 6-Green Star SA Office v1 Design rating by the Green Building Council of South Africa (GBCSA). The building entails not only reducing energy and water consumption and other sustainable building initiatives but also looking at the sustainability levels of the entire supply chain as a whole.

"Different built environment professionals focus on different aspects of sustainability. Personally, when I think about a living, breathing, healthy building, it would incorporate a social aspect too. It also focuses on the way in which the building design accommodates how people move within the building and use the building. The building needs to allow people to express themselves in a way that past buildings did not. We have a very narrow view of what an organisation looks like, but organisations continue to change thanks to millennials in the workplace, retraining within the organisation, the retirement age that continues to rise and job roles that are changing," says Maserow.

"A good building design needs to accommodate multiple age groups. One of the things that we are aware of is that buildings need to be designed for communication. For example, almost every office building that we design has interconnecting stairs so that people can see each other and communicate. This also promotes health and fitness within an organisation," adds Robinson.

Creating live-work-play precincts

Many leading cities have focused on creating work-live-play precincts. Melbourne, in particular, has been extremely successful in pioneering this trend.

"Mixed-use developments are very popular and successful in Melbourne, with residential, office and retail buildings being built in close proximity to each other. Many people are able to live close to their places of employment, they don't necessarily need cars and it promotes a better work-life balance," says Robinson.

Maserow says that there is plenty of opportunity to incorporate this mixed-use development philosophy into areas of Gauteng.

"We've been in discussion with people involved in these types of developments over the past few years. In the past, the prime goal of developments in Gauteng was to compartmentalise the functionality of the spaces and mixed-use developments were not very popular. Fortunately, this is changing and it's becoming an urgent reality in Gauteng and South Africa," states Maserow.

Geospatial smart phone apps

One of the trends in the industry is the use of technology to control and customise individual spaces and areas. Greaves says that individual customisation options include being able to adjust lighting as well as heating and cooling systems from a mobile phone or tablet.

"The way that we use technology is also changing. People travel to work and other places with their smart phones and there are apps that enable them to adjust things like lighting and the temperature in whatever space they are in. Geospatial apps are changing the way buildings function and this is going to change how our intelligent buildings work. It helps designers and engineers to make a building emotionally intelligent so that it meets the needs of the building occupants," concludes Greaves.

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