

Has the Pandemic Transformed the Office Forever?

Companies are figuring out how to balance what appears to be a lasting shift toward remote work with the value of the physical workplace.

By [John Seabrook](#) January 25, 2021

What's an office for? The COVID-19 pandemic has presented companies with an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the fundamentals of the physical workplace. Illustration by Maxime Mouysset

David Corns, the California managing director of R/GA, a global advertising and marketing agency, needed to decide whether to renew the lease on the company's [office](#) in downtown San Francisco. It was spring, 2020, and the lease was set to expire on August 31st. Before the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), commercial real estate was pricier in San Francisco than it was anywhere else in the country, including New York, where R/GA has its headquarters. Since leaving the office on March 13th, the hundred-person S.F. staff—the creatives, designers, strategists, account execs, and technologists who make digital products and services for

[Slack](#), [Reddit](#), and Airbnb, among many other brands, along with support teams—had been working from home. “We have seen productivity go through the roof,” Corns told me. So why did the staff require so much expensive office space? Did they need any at all?

In the past three decades, a series of quiet revolutions in design have changed the way offices are used, erasing former hierarchies of walls and cubicles and incorporating workplace methodologies from the technology industry into team-based, open-plan layouts. At the same time, digital tools such as e-mail, Excel, Google Docs, video conferencing, virtual whiteboarding, and chat channels like Slack have made a worker’s presence in those offices less essential. The pandemic has collapsed these divergent trends into an existential question: What’s an office for? Is it a place for newbies to learn from experienced colleagues? A way for bosses to oversee shirkers? A platform for collaboration? A source of friends and social life? A respite from the family? A reason to leave the house? It turns out that work, which is what the office was supposed to be for, is possible to do from somewhere else.

The pandemic has presented R/GA and countless other large enterprises with an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the importance of presence, proximity, and place in workspace planning. Twenty-seven per cent of the American

workforce will be remote in 2021, according to a recent survey by Upwork, a freelancing marketplace. About twenty million workers have moved—many of them out of major cities—or are planning to. Office vacancies continue to rise: CBRE, the world's largest commercial-real-estate-services firm, recently estimated a San Francisco vacancy rate of more than sixteen per cent, the highest on record. Major real-estate companies such as Boston Properties and Vornado Realty Trust, which, owing to long-term commercial leases, have traditionally been recession-proof, have lost more than a third of their stock-market value in the past year. Managers—and workers—are struggling to figure out what their post-pandemic offices will look like, and how to balance what appears to be a lasting shift toward remote work with the advantages of the physical workplace.

Before the pandemic, the physical and virtual workspaces often seemed to be at odds. The digital resources that now allow many workers to do their jobs from home had made it possible to come into the office and spend all day online. Although these tools claim to enhance the physical workspace by improving communication, they can undermine office culture by reducing the face-to-face encounters that open-plan layouts purport to promote.

“Digital technology should not be a substitute for human connection,” [Microsoft's](#) C.E.O., Satya Nadella, told me. (It is

sometimes, of course, used for precisely that reason in open-plan offices—you can't concentrate on your own work if someone next to you is talking, and there are few spaces in which to speak privately with a colleague.) "Digital technology should help human connection when there are constraints of space and time," Nadella added.

Corns discussed options with R/GA executives in New York, including Sean Lyons, the C.E.O.; Wes Harris, the global C.O.O.; and David Boehm, who oversees the company's real estate and facilities. The New York executives also had to decide what to do about the company's two-hundred-thousand-square-foot Manhattan base, an office, at 450 West Thirty-third Street, that was designed by the celebrated British architecture firm Foster + Partners. The design process is depicted in Gary Hustwit's 2016 documentary, "Workplace," which charts the evolution of the twenty-first-century office.

R/GA's headquarters used to be a stop on design tours of cutting-edge New York City offices. Another must-see workspace was Campari America's office, done by Gensler, the world's largest workplace-design firm, and situated in the Grace Building, overlooking Bryant Park. But, as the pandemic dragged on, an expensive showplace office in Manhattan, where rental costs in a Class A high-rise can amount to twenty thousand dollars per employee per year,

began to seem like an albatross of costly, unused space.

In San Francisco, Corns's decision was relatively simple: "We said, 'Let's pull ourselves out of this lease, go fully virtual, and treat the office like we would treat any client project, where we start from a blank slate.' "

During the first six months of the pandemic, R/GA's Talent Experience Team conducted a series of surveys and workshops with the agency's sixteen hundred employees around the world. Wes Harris told me, "The first one was just: Are you able to get any work done? Are your clients satisfied? How are you feeling?" Results were positive.

Remote work was working, by and large. Thirty per cent of supervisors said that their workers were more productive at home; only seven per cent said people were getting less done. Two months into the pandemic, it seemed likely that working from home would be a permanent change, rather than a temporary stopgap.

The next set of surveys, conducted in June and July, asked, Harris said, "Now that we are successfully working in a virtual world, what should the future post-COVID office look like, and how do you blend the physical and the digital in this new paradigm?" Everyone said that they missed seeing their colleagues in person, but very few workers envisaged returning to the office five days a week. One to three days was more appealing.

“People want to be able to work from anywhere, but there are times they want to collaborate,” Harris told me. Instead of a big central office like 450 West Thirty-third Street, with seating for twelve hundred and fifty employees and a two-hundred-person conference room, it might be better to have smaller satellite offices nearer to workers’ homes. Sean Lyons referenced “Dunbar’s number,” the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar’s theory, derived from studies of Neolithic villages and tribes, that humans can maintain stable social relationships with no more than a hundred and fifty people at any one time. R/GA was planning to open a hub office in Brooklyn, Lyons said, because so many of their New York people lived there.

Six months in, the final round of surveys showed that employees—driven by adrenaline and anxiety about underperforming, and because there wasn’t much else to do while sheltering in place—were working all the time.

The surveys turned up a number of “pain points,” including a lack of spontaneous interactions with colleagues, difficulty integrating new hires into company culture remotely, Zoom fatigue, and ergonomically incorrect seating. But the sorest was felt by R/GA staff who had young children. For a stressed-out parent, W.F.H. can quickly turn into *W.T.F.!*

But, for many of the company’s employees, fewer opportunities for collaboration and the erosion of company

culture weren't major drawbacks. A summary of the survey results reported that conducting meetings over Zoom meant "more voices are being heard and there is better meeting etiquette." One respondent wrote, "People tend to wait for others to finish their thoughts before speaking." Another observed, "WFH actually forces our entire team to work more closely."

"The wind, the wind, that's all you think about—you gotta learn to live in the moment."

Cartoon by Karl Stevens

Early in the pandemic, Microsoft's Nadella suggested in a conversation with editors of the *Times* that effective remote collaboration relied in part on "social capital." The concept that communities grow out of personal interactions was popularized in Robert Putnam's 2000 best-seller, "[Bowling Alone](#)." In a job setting, social capital is accumulated by working in the presence of others, and depleted during virtual interactions. Nadella told the *Times* he was concerned that "maybe we are burning some of the social capital we built up in this phase where we are all working remote. What's the measure for that?"

But when I spoke to Nadella he allowed that when you see people in their homes, with their noisy children and importunate pets, struggling to stay focussed and upbeat, "you have a different kind of empathy for your co-workers."

At R/GA, the survey also revealed that, without the company's New York headquarters, people who worked in

other cities and countries felt much more involved. One worker wrote, "New York has stopped acting like it's New York and everyone else."

Finally, the survey asked the staff to imagine the office of the future: "More spaces for collaborating. Less individual desk space"; "Would love to see more team-oriented spaces like a table, screen, and partial privacy that a team can use and have informal meetings instead of everything requiring a conference room"; "The office can be very overwhelming and very hard to concentrate, that's been the best part about working from home, being able to focus"; "I feel very wary of big open floor plan spaces, which have always made it easy for bugs and viruses to travel."

In all, R/GA gathered fifty-five hundred comments from seven hundred and fifty workers. Harris and his colleagues incorporated these findings into briefs that they would share with architects and designers as the company made its post-pandemic plans, beginning with the San Francisco office. David Boehm told me that he hoped the resulting design would serve as a prototype for the R/GA office of the future.

In August, Corns took out a lease on a new, smaller space in a high-rise on Fremont Street, in San Francisco's financial district, at a much lower rent. "We had talked about getting three smaller spaces—in South Bay, Oakland, San Francisco

—to cut people’s commute times,” he told me. “I thought we would actually go that route, but people said, ‘We want to be together.’ ”

Corns then sought out a designer to help create a workspace. After a brief search, he chose Primo Orpilla, a principal and co-founder of Studio O+A, an award-winning San Francisco-based architecture and design firm with three decades of experience creating workspaces for companies such as [Facebook](#), Uber, and Yelp, some of them also clients of R/GA.

If you entered office life in the eighties, as I did, hierarchy was everywhere you looked. Bosses and other big shots had walled offices with views, while small fry toiled in cubicle reefs, bathed in fluorescent light. The industrial open-office setting where C. C. Baxter labors in Billy Wilder’s 1960 film, “The Apartment,” a kind of white-collar factory, gave way to the cube farm where Lester Burnham sits in “American Beauty,” from 1999. Conformity still reigned in the cubicle era, but at least an office schnook had partial visual privacy on three sides. (For sound privacy, you needed an office.) Although they are now derided, cubicles held their charms; I met and courted my wife in one. However, like Bud Baxter, my dream was to have a door with my name on it.

The cubicle evolved out of utopian notions of office flexibility and flow that were promoted in the sixties by Robert Propst,

the head of research for the Herman Miller company. Propst grasped that office work was fundamentally different from factory work. Nikil Saval, in his 2014 book, "[Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace](#)" (2014), writes, "Propst was among the first designers to argue that office work was mental work and that mental effort was tied to environmental enhancement of one's physical properties." Propst believed that, in particular, knowledge workers—a term coined by Peter Drucker in 1959—would benefit from what he called a "mind-oriented living space." He sought to integrate a more dynamic concept of work into a program of hinged partitions and standing desks. The Action Office, as Propst called it, debuted in 1964. But by the mid-eighties it had evolved into the inert cubicle, and Propst was blamed for fathering it. What happened?

Propst's action-oriented designs may or may not have increased productivity and collaboration, but they did enhance the bottom line, allowing office managers to add more employees without having to move to a bigger space. As density increased, partitions collapsed into the smallest possible footprint: the ever-shrinking cube. Two years before Propst's death, in 2000, he told an interviewer, "The dark side of this is that not all organizations are intelligent and progressive. Lots are run by crass people who can take the same kind of equipment and create hellholes. They make little bitty cubicles and stuff people in them. Barren, rathole

places.”

Not long after I had been promoted to a private office—it was closer to Jonathan Pryce’s in “Brazil” (1985) than to Tom Hanks’s in “Big” (1988)—a democratizing design spirit began to emerge out of Silicon Valley, upending settled markers of status and reshuffling personal and collaborative space according to a more communal philosophy of team-based work. Perimeter offices moved inside, so that the whole space got natural light; the boss, at least, was more accessible. Cubicle walls dropped from sixty-five inches to forty-eight, then to thirty-six, and then disappeared altogether, replaced by contiguous desks, which was my allotted space at the *New Yorker* office when the pandemic hit.

Like many older workers who once had offices, I hoped the pandemic might reverse the open-plan trend; people working in open offices take sixty-two per cent more sick leave, according to a 2011 Danish study. As I was to discover, the pandemic, far from reversing the decline of personal space in the office, seems likely to hasten its demise.

Growing up in the Bay Area in the seventies and eighties, Primo Orpilla got to see at first hand a new democratic design aesthetic bubbling up from the California tech scene. In the early eighties, the offices of most large tech companies were still what Orpilla calls Dilbertvilles, after the

cubicle-dwelling engineer in the Scott Adams comic strip. "They were heavy, heavy hierarchical structures," he told me—like those of Initech, the company in Mike Judge's 1999 satire, "Office Space." "Cubicles, offices, meeting rooms—that was it. We hadn't had a brainstorm room yet—collaboration wasn't even in the conversation. You just went from meeting to meeting to meeting."

Orpilla studied interior design at San Jose State University, and, in the mid-eighties, he interned at a workplace firm in Sunnyvale, where he did space planning for the defense contractor Lockheed Martin, which was based nearby. "I got to observe engineers and how technology gets made," he said. "There would be one superstar engineer who was the chief tech officer and the smartest guy in the room, and then a bunch of other engineers who needed guidance would form around him." He noted how engineers would use movable whiteboards to create ad-hoc brainstorming rooms of their own. Unlike teams in hardware design, which tended to be stable and to pursue projects from beginning to end, software teams would form, dissolve, and reconfigure as the work progressed and as new, unforeseen problems arose.

Engineers were the company's "brain trust," Orpilla said. But "they were dealt with as second-class citizens. They took the cubes in the middle of the warehouse without windows. If you were a big sales guy, you had an office. It was all about

the guys selling the product.”

By the late eighties, office managers started asking designers to facilitate this new, team-oriented style of work. “It all became about: How do we take care of the people who create this product?” Orpilla said. “They need to be inspired, they need to be fed, and we need to give them the spaces to do their work.” Free food and other amenities kept engineers in the office, coding into the night. “They work long hours, they tend to work in the dark,” Orpilla went on. “They like to hang out for long periods of time.”

The Internet boom of the nineties, which was led in part by entrepreneurial engineers, played a role in spreading the team-based methodology to other forms of knowledge work. Creating a successful digital product such as Google’s Ad Words—an invention that helped turn the money-losing search company into an advertising-driven colossus—often involves cross-disciplinary teams of engineers, marketers, and product managers. As software became the engine of growth in the tech industry, and in the economy as a whole, hard-walled barriers between formerly separate divisions of workers continued to melt away.

Orpilla and his design partner, Verda Alexander, started Studio O+A in 1991. Over the years, the amenities they provided became increasingly lavish. “We did skateboard ramps with DJ turntables, lots of game rooms with pool and

ping-pong tables; we did music rooms and cafeterias with sophisticated barista bars and beer taps," Alexander wrote in 2019, in an essay for *Fast Company*. Workplaces had laundry service, napping rooms, and gyms—further incentives to keep employees from leaving the office.

In the late nineties, a few businesses outside tech sought to seed similar cross-departmental innovation through open-plan design. Among the first was the advertising agency Chiat Day, whose co-founder Jay Chiat, after hiring Frank Gehry to build the company's binocular-fronted building in Venice, Los Angeles, got rid of private offices, cubicles, and desks, making it possible to work from anywhere in the office. The Chiat Day workplace was like Propst's Action Office after a triple espresso.

With today's mobile technology and broadband speed, the plan might have worked, but Chiat, who died in 2002, was two decades ahead of his time. After the company moved out of the space, *Wired's* 1999 postmortem noted that the Venice office had become "engulfed in petty turf wars, kindergarten-variety subterfuge, incessant griping, management bullying, employee insurrections, internal chaos, and plummeting productivity. Worst of all, there was no damn place to sit."

Designers addressed complaints about the noise and the distractions by incorporating elements of "activity-based

working," a term coined, in 1994, by the Dutch design consultant Erik Veldhoen. Layouts featured a mixture of open areas for team-based work, "living rooms," and "huddle spaces" meant to promote casual encounters and focussed work. Activity-based design also helped introduce "hot desking" (unassigned first-come, first-served seating), and "hoteling" (reservable desks).

Studio O+A offers prospective clients a menu of different "typologies"—semi-modular, activity-based room types that can be fitted into any open plan. These include the Think Tank ("A conceptual greenhouse in which the first sprouts of projects are nurtured"), the Library ("A place of respite"), and various Sanctuaries and yurt-like Shelters ("This ancient structure from the steppes of Mongolia is a popular modern amenity").

Orpilla told me that O+A wanted to "create a kit of room types that suggest a certain type of behavior." It was what made his job so interesting: "You're changing behavior. That's really what workplace design is about."

In recent years, activity-based design has become a powerful tool in many companies' branding and recruitment efforts. Gensler has specialized in creating this kind of space, and, with its design of the Campari America headquarters, which opened in March, 2019, the firm hit peak office-as-life-style. The place is intended for workers

who are “living the brand every day,” Stefanie Shunk, Gensler’s lead designer on the project, told me as she showed me around the deserted workplace in early August. Desks are first-come, first-served, although Ugo Fiorenzo, the head of Campari America, admits to having a “preferred corner.” Personal items are stored in lockers; anything left behind on a desk at day’s end winds up on a “table of shame.” Fiorenzo described the aim of the design as “collaboration and collision.” There are five different bar spaces scattered around the two floors, including a speakeasy, the Boulevardier, hidden under the internal stairs. Shunk used the metaphor of the perfect cocktail to describe the interior aesthetics: “Clarity, color, aroma, flavor, and finish.” The tasting profiles of particular liquors (the company also owns Wild Turkey, Skyy Vodka, and Grand Marnier, among other brands) inform the color palettes in branded meeting rooms.

Shunk and I were joined by Jaime Celebron, Campari’s senior director of human resources, at the reception desk, designed to look like a Milanese espresso bar. Normally, “you’d kind of belly up to the bar,” Celebron said, nodding toward the white marble C-shaped counter. We were careful not to touch it.

It was Celebron’s first time back since the second week of March. “I wish you could see it with the people,” she said,

looking stricken.

We followed the tour that new hires used to receive, ending up in the intimate-feeling Boulevardier. We didn't stay long. With the pandemic, the bar felt like a *COVID* cocktail. Living the brand was one thing; getting sick from it was another.

"You're not listening to me."

Cartoon by Liana Finck

In the months after the March shutdown, Gensler, O+A, and many other workplace designers scrambled to put together safety protocols for clients that, like Campari, were considering a speedy return to the office. Workplaces premised on bringing teams of people closer together now had to keep them apart.

"Clients are looking to us for answers," Amanda Carroll, a principal at Gensler, told me. The white-collar workplace has never been regulated like manufacturing, construction, and health care, sectors where the Occupational Safety and Health Administration sets health and safety rules. With the pandemic, potentially fatal hazards entered the office, as did possible liability issues for employers, but *OSHA* declined to revise its standards. David Michaels, who headed *OSHA* during the Obama Administration, told the *Washington Post*, in June, "Thousands of workers have complained to *OSHA*, and *OSHA* has told them they're on their own." The Trump Administration was focussed on slashing regulations governing businesses, not creating more of them.

Some states have issued back-to-work protocols, but in many cases it's left to designers like Carroll and her colleagues to develop best practices concerning social distancing, surface cleaning, and air quality, and to convey these to their clients as suggested procedures. Carroll told me, "We are used to industry standards on inclusivity and diversity, but this new social responsibility around health and wellness takes it to another dimension. Plus, it's highly personal to individuals—what their perceived level of safety is."

The Great Fomite Freakout—a term coined by Dylan Morris, a researcher at U.C.L.A.—was in full swing in early summer, when I began joining Zoom calls with designers at O+A, Gensler, and Arup, a global engineering and design firm. At first, when the virus was thought to be conveyed mainly in droplets of moisture, surfaces were believed to be a primary medium of transmission. (A fomite is an inanimate object that can carry contagions.) Anything that workers regularly touched—railings, elevator buttons, faucets, the reception desk, the coffeepot, the water cooler—was a possible hot spot. Carroll and her colleagues collected information on the antimicrobial properties of copper versus plastic and cardboard. Designers developed "sneeze guards" and transparent barriers around open-plan workstations, making them, in effect, see-through cubicles, and leading to an acute shortage of plexiglass.

It was then discovered that, although the virus can linger on some surfaces for days, it is extremely unlikely that a person can catch it by touching those surfaces. By early August, the scientific consensus was that airborne transmission might be a greater threat than fomites. The possibility that the virus could circulate in the office's heating-and-air-conditioning system meant that designers had to add information about clients' H.V.A.C. systems to their portfolios of *COVID*-related considerations. It also meant that barriers alone wouldn't stop the virus from spreading.

The virtual meetings I sat in on were charged with a sense of high purpose, as designers on the front lines used their skills to potentially save lives. Signage was key; 2020 proved to be a golden age for graphic designers. Proposed safety signage in white-collar workplaces was greatly expanded to convey information about keeping social distance, hand washing, mask wearing, and one-way flow in "curated" elevators, lobbies, and hallways. Some signs used humor and whimsy: "*Hug That Sneeze*," "*Wash Your Paws*." Others sought to elicit empathy for colleagues.

But, in spite of all the research and recommended interventions, the majority of offices remained almost empty; many of the signs were never deployed. By the end of November, according to the Partnership for New York City, only ten per cent of white-collar workers in Manhattan had

returned to their offices, and even as people get vaccinated it seems unlikely that many employers will be bringing staffs back before the summer of 2021; Google recently pushed its return date to September, 2021.

Some enhanced hygiene and cleaning procedures may outlive the pandemic, but they are likely to be absorbed into the voluntary rating system for “healthy buildings” administered by Fitwel, the real-estate industry’s certification board, and operated by the Center for Active Design. Fitwel awards ratings to both buildings and individual workplaces based on things like access to natural light and the promotion of physical activity. Many *COVID*-related best practices have already been incorporated into Fitwel’s downloadable Viral Response Module.

Studio O+A assembled its own *COVID* tool kit for office safety. Then Orpilla asked the staff to develop a new set of *COVID*-related typologies—activity-based spaces that might become standard features of a post-pandemic workplace. The Donning/Doffing Room was the top typology that emerged from a meeting I attended, in which the staff presented about a dozen ideas. This space, some version of which many other workplace firms were also proposing, would include a temperature-check station, an isolation room for people who tested hot, a place for mandatory hand washing, and lockers to store outside gear and shoes, in

addition to personal items. (Thermal temperature checks are now common in those workplaces which have reopened, even as it's become clear that they aren't very useful at stopping the spread of *COVID*, because so many people with the disease are asymptomatic.) Other typologies that seemed like potential keepers included the Radio Station, a room with enhanced A/V capabilities to connect with remote workers; the Boot Camp, an area for new hires; and the Rickshaw, a small, enclosed private workspace.

Orpilla sent R/GA the tool kit and the new typologies, and Corns came up with a design brief. O+A followed up with a questionnaire and a "visioning" session that added detail to the ideas outlined in the brief.

Meanwhile, in New York, Lyons and his team had decided to sublet the lower floor of R/GA's HQ. The news was reported in *The Real Deal*, a real-estate magazine, in early September. The article noted that available sublet space in New York had spiked dramatically since the pandemic. The only businesses that seemed to be expanding their real-estate footprint in the city were Big Tech companies, which were also setting the standard for working from home. Amazon completed its lease agreement for the former Lord & Taylor department store, at Thirty-eighth Street and Fifth Avenue, and Facebook leased 1.5 million square feet in Hudson Yards. However, as Dror Poleg, the author of "[Rethinking](#)

[Real Estate](#)" (2020) and a co-chair of the Urban Land Institute's Technology and Innovation Council in New York, noted to me, both deals had been in process before the pandemic hit.

R/GA's remaining floor at 450 West Thirty-third Street would become a hybrid workspace, where some employees would be physically present some of the time, working at reservable desks, but on any given day the bulk of employees would be remote. Sean Lyons, the C.E.O., envisaged people being in the office for three days a week and home for two, on average. "In the Singapore office, they want people in the office Monday and Friday, so they can begin and end the week together," he said.

One of the pain points that the final round of R/GA surveys turned up was the fear that remote workers will lose out on opportunities that in-person workers get by virtue of proximity. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents thought that the stigma of working remotely would linger after the pandemic. "When working from home people felt others saw them as unproductive, difficult to reach, and taking an unofficial day off," a summary found. "There is a lot of concern that when some return to the office, expectations and processes will shift back to favoring those who are physically present."

The hybrid office sounds like a logical post-pandemic

approach, and many companies are trying it, but mixing in-person and remote workers presents new challenges for managers. Ethan Bernstein, a professor at Harvard Business School who studies the workplace, told me that a hybrid setup is very hard to get right, and that he advises businesses to avoid it: "I'd say stay all virtual—hybrid is likely to deliver the worst of both worlds." A hybrid company still has substantial real-estate costs, and it also has to contend with the potentially serious threat to company culture posed by resentful remote workers who feel that they've been unfairly denied plum assignments and promotions. And what about all the people who return to work to discover that they no longer have a desk, and that the sweaters and photographs and other personal items they left behind have been packed up or, worse, placed on a table of shame? As Bernstein put it, "People generally prefer a 'home' to a 'hotel'—in life and at work."

R/GA's young and tech-savvy workers have been using tools like Zoom for years, Lyons told me, so he was not too worried about going hybrid: "We've always had to manage a hybrid workforce before that term was even out there. This creates an opportunity to take that a little bit further." However, he added, "you do have to continually be open to looking for those potential divisions in the culture. We're going to have to navigate that."

By the time the pandemic hit, open-plan offices had become even more hated than cube farms. Well-heeled companies might be willing to spend money on activity-based typologies that offer respite from open-plan distractions, but, when times are hard and office budgets are cut, the yurt and the extra huddle space are often the first things to go. After the financial crisis of 2008, open-plan fell victim to some of the same sinister forces that cubed Propst's workplace dreams. An open-plan layout was even easier to densify than a cubicle farm. In 2010, the average North American employer allocated two hundred square feet to each worker; by 2017, that number had shrunk to about a hundred and thirty square feet.

Workers have responded to this steady erosion of personal space by building cubicles of sound with headphones. Bound in a sonic nutshell, you can feel like a king of infinite office space, as long as you don't look up from your screen. Since most office work takes place on virtual desktops anyway, it was easy, pre-pandemic, to perform what was essentially remote work while occupying your employer's expensive real estate.

In "The Truth About Open Offices," an article published in the *Harvard Business Review* in December, 2019, Ethan Bernstein and Ben Waber, the president of Humanyze, a workplace-analytics firm, used smartphones and sensors to

track face-to-face and digital interactions at two Fortune 500 companies before and after the companies moved from cubicles to open offices. The authors wrote, "We found that face-to-face interactions *dropped* by roughly 70% after the firms transitioned to open offices, while electronic interactions increased to compensate." The virtual workplace, instead of complementing the physical one, had become a refuge from it.

The technology industry gave birth to the modern office, and then created the tools to do without it. This paradox helps explain tech's tortured history with remote work. By 2009, forty per cent of I.B.M.'s workforce was remote. The I.B.M. Smarter Workforce Institute promoted "telework" to clients as the future, claiming that remote workers "were highly engaged, more likely to consider their workplaces as innovative, happier about their job prospects and less stressed than their more traditional, office-bound colleagues."

But in 2017, with profits falling, the company delivered an ultimatum: everyone must return to the office or leave the company. Likewise, Marissa Mayer, shortly after becoming the C.E.O. of Yahoo, in 2012, issued an edict to its twelve thousand employees banning W.F.H. Both companies cited diminished collaboration as a reason. (Mayer, a new mom at the time, built a "mother's room" next to her office so that

she could take the baby to work.) By 2016, about a third of Yahoo's workforce had left. In 2017, Mayer herself departed the company, with two hundred and sixty million dollars.

With the onset of the pandemic, technology companies have once again become champions of remote work, while also expanding their real-estate portfolios. Facebook has said that it expects half its workforce to be remote by 2030.

Twitter told its employees that they never have to return to the office. Microsoft plans to keep all but essential workers remote until this summer, but it is also proceeding with a multibillion-dollar renovation of its five-hundred-acre Redmond, Washington, campus. In August, R.E.I., the outdoor-equipment-and-clothing retailer, announced that it would not move into its four-hundred-thousand-square-foot headquarters in Bellevue, Washington. Facebook bought the complex in September for three hundred and sixty-eight million dollars. For Facebook, which has fifty-six thousand employees—more than four thousand of which were added during 2020—in eighty offices around the world, the former R.E.I. site represents a fraction of its future space needs, even if half its workers are remote in ten years.

Microsoft has traditionally had more of a wall-and-cubicle culture than younger tech businesses. The renovated Redmond digs will have fewer private offices and more team-based space. The company plans to start moving in by

2023.

Still, the pandemic has greatly accelerated Microsoft's efforts to create a virtual office for the future. Jared Spataro, the company's Vice-President for Modern Work, talked me through its plans, which will be designed around Teams, its conferencing software.

The PC revolution "digitized paperwork," Spataro said. Instead of physical pages and folders sitting on a desk, office workers had digital documents and files sitting on a virtual desktop inside a computer. But these digital desktops didn't sit inside a virtual office, one in which you easily could move around among other desktops and meet in conference rooms or common areas. There was no virtual water cooler to facilitate serendipitous encounters.

The pandemic, Spataro went on, is accelerating a "second digital transformation": the creation of a virtual cloud-based office that connects the desktops, where employees will go to work, whether they're present in the physical office or working remotely. It sounds like the digital version of the open-plan-office revolution—the walls around the individual's virtual desktop are coming down. And, once again, software engineers are leading the way.

"We think every company is going to need to invest in a digital workspace for each employee," Spataro said. He

added that he was already hearing from companies that want to use the money saved by reducing their physical footprint to build a custom office in the cloud, loaded with proprietary digital whiteboarding and visual-conferencing tools, which will transcend space and time. If you want to know what happened in the virtual office last Tuesday, you can go back and replay the meetings.

Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz "Those spaces will very quickly become the center of gravity for work," he went on. "We'll use them in the kitchen, we'll use them in transit to our jobs. Even when we move back into real estate, we won't be back to one hundred per cent. You will come into the office, do your work, and then roll up your workspace and take it with you."

The privacy implications of the virtual office make the lack of personal space in the open-plan office seem quaint. Each keystroke in a virtual office is trackable. In the mid-nineties, workers started to be issued key cards, which meant the company could know when you were in the building and when you weren't. In a virtual workspace, it would know almost everything you do at work.

Spataro agreed that we will need some kind of worker bill of rights, detailing what personal information your employer owns. But, he added, that's not Microsoft's job: "That's the domain of government."

Toward the end of October, Orpilla and his staff convened a Zoom meeting with Corns and his colleagues to present O+A's plan for R/GA's San Francisco office. Everyone was working from home, except David Boehm, who was logging in from 450 West Thirty-third Street, where he was overseeing the remodelling of the downsized headquarters.

Dani Gelfand, a senior designer at O+A, led the group on a virtual tour of the proposed plan, beginning with the reception area. This space should "signal a feeling of safety," she said. It featured touchless entry doors, sanitizing stations, an infrared temperature checkpoint, and an isolation room for people who register a fever. (At least in there they'll get some privacy.)

Using her cursor, Gelfand directed us through the Donning/Doffing Room, noting the lockers for personal items. She continued through a communal pantry "employing touchless equipment where possible"—a contactless coffee machine, a touchless utensils dispenser, a pedal-operated water cooler—to a general-wellness room, which, she said, would be mainly for mothers but also for "prayer and decompression." We followed Gelfand into the main communal workspace, which featured twenty-four-person workstations, with unassigned but reservable individual desks arranged in a pinwheel formation, and barriers between the desk surfaces that offered a modicum

of visual privacy.

This part of the post-pandemic office looked much like the pre-pandemic open-plan layout, only more so. Corns, picking up on the similarity, said, "Nothing needs to look like an office before. So these workstations don't need to be desks, per se."

"Maybe we just have lounge furniture and a place to plug in," Gelfand suggested.

The virtual tour then proceeded through an area with several "focus pods" that resembled three-sided restaurant booths. "The pods could be made higher, so they are more like an enclosed-booth experience," Gelfand noted. That sounded like a cubicle, the typology that dare not speak its name.

The rest of the office was taken up with a studio for photography and digital art work, and a number of semi-enclosed conference rooms with large video screens and better sound for connecting with staff working remotely. Gelfand likened this aspect of the plan to a "communications field office."

Boehm said that it looked like there would be a lot of traffic through the focus areas to get to the pantry and the studio. Compounding these potential distractions would be the sound of people conducting virtual meetings in the A/V

areas. "Managing the sound in the office is going to be critical as we move forward," he said.

Everyone in the virtual meeting stared at the office plan on the screen, trying to imagine what it would be like to be on the floor physically while some co-workers were there virtually. The real office of the future, it seemed to me, lay somewhere between the physical space O+A had designed and the virtual space that we were all observing it from.

Finally, Gelfand noted there would be two private offices, as specified in the brief—one for human resources, for meetings requiring privacy, and the other for the managing director, Corns himself.

One day in December, I arranged to return to *The New Yorker's* office, on the twenty-third floor of One World Trade Center, in lower Manhattan, which the staff had vacated abruptly in March. It was a gray, blustery afternoon. The downtown sidewalks, normally lively at lunchtime, were deserted, except for construction workers, who were engaged in adding office and residential space to a market glutted with it. Like a supertanker, the ship that is New York commercial real estate is hard to turn. It keeps plowing ahead, even though it has reached the edge of the known world.

The silent lobby was empty except for masked security. A

Christmas tree twinkled at the far end. I was reminded of the riotous office-party scene in "The Apartment." Remote work may increase efficiency and productivity, but a virtual office holiday party is a different thing entirely. Sitting at home, watching tipsy colleagues get flirty on a screen could bankrupt one's social capital.

The opening of King Vidor's silent film "The Crowd," from 1928, shows us the busy New York harbor, followed by the streets and sidewalks of midtown, teeming with people and traffic. Then the camera swoops in through a high window, and glides over a sea of identical desks in a vast, factory-style open office, until it stops at a single desk with a name engraved on a small metal plaque—John Sims, the film's Everyman hero. In the ninety-second sequence, the crowded city has shrunk in scale, becoming only as big as one man at his desk.

As far as I could tell, I was the only soul in our Gensler-designed office. Post-it reminders from March were curling at the edges. The silence felt oppressive.

Following the new one-way directional signage, I eventually came to my desk. I booted up my virtual desktop, thinking I might take advantage of the rare quiet and privacy to actually do some work in the office. But I couldn't concentrate. I missed my colleagues. Whether walled, open, or cloud-based, an office is about the people who work

there. Without the people, the office is an empty shell. ♦

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