

The New Hybrid Neighborhood

A workplace worth the commute

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Despite employers' best efforts to entice everyone back to the office with free snacks and fun events, people are dragging their feet. Their reluctance isn't about COVID: If you look at the data, far more people have been to a restaurant, movie theater or traveled on an airplane than who've gone to the office, according to the Kastle Back to Work Barometer. People's resistance doesn't seem to be about flexible work either. Hybrid work has been embraced by 71% of global leaders giving people the option to work two-to-three days from home or other locations.

Theories about why they're hesitant to return to the office range from the dread of wearing work clothes to long commutes. But maybe the most obvious reason is being overlooked: Do people believe anything has really changed if everything looks the same?

In offices around the world, organizations have adopted hybrid work policies, but haven't changed their offices to support the new realities of hybrid work. Some say they're waiting until employees are back in the office to make changes. But hybrid work means people will come and go at different times and, without changes, the office is often likely to feel empty and lack energy. After two years of isolation, who wants that? Hybrid work also means people will spend a lot more time on video calls, and will look for more privacy to meet with remote teammates. Or worse, they'll do video meetings in the open and become the hybrid version of the office loud talker.

Hybrid work policies will work better if an organization's space changes in tandem.

The new era of hybrid work means people will have choices about where to work and, in many ways, the office has to work even harder to attract people and keep them coming back. Offices will need to earn people's commute by meeting a new set of needs: support hybrid work, establish connections, create a sense of belonging and promote wellbeing — all of which suffered during the pandemic.

A NEW INSPIRATION

This requires a shakeup in thinking about the future of the office. Rather than basing office design on the need to fit more people into less space, the workplace should draw inspiration from a new source that is less about efficiency and more about humanity — the vibrant communities in which we live. Jane Jacobs, author of "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," argued decades ago people need diverse neighborhoods to thrive, where homes, bustling sidewalks, shops, parks and public spaces come together and "exist in extraordinary variety."

WHY NEIGHBORHOODS?

Neighborhoods exude vitality and energy — nothing is static — places and activities adapt and change. The neighborhood is where people form relationships, feel a sense of belonging and build trust.

Today, organizational psychologist and author Adam Grant agrees. “A better vision for a workplace is a community — a place where people bond around shared values, feel valued as human beings, and have a voice in decisions that affect them,” says Grant. The best neighborhoods are ones that foster inclusion and exude personality, where ideas are born and trends are launched.

This is what people at work need more than ever before.

BUILDING A NEIGHBORHOOD AT WORK

Organizations can create diverse neighborhoods in their workplace as a tangible way to communicate their values and shift their culture. The workplace can create the same energy and connection people feel sitting in a sidewalk cafe or the same level of solitude they experience in their library or the privacy of their own home.

Neighborhoods at work, like the ones people live in, are a homebase for people and teams, departments or project teams. They include a variety of interconnected spaces that support different types of work, a mixture of uses and the natural flow from one to another. They include:

- Individual spaces assigned to one person or shared amongst the team
- Collaboration spaces for in-person and virtual interactions that support the different ways people need to come together
- Places with appropriate privacy for individual heads down work or finding solitude and rejuvenation
- Areas to gather, socialize and learn with teammates

Neighborhoods become a destination, where people feel comfort and confidence they can find their teammates and the tools they need to do their work.

For a neighborhood to truly work for people it has to be based on a fundamentally new design goals:

A Framework for Employee Experiences

- **Equity:** Create a more equitable and inclusive experience for all participants, with a design goal to eliminate the gap between co-located and remote employees.
- **Engagement:** Design settings for a range of experiences that help people participate fully, focus deeply and stay in flow longer.
- **Ease:** Design a variety of intuitive virtual and physical experiences that are easy to navigate and control.

4 KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Every neighborhood has its own distinctive character — four key design principles guide their creation.

Me + We

Just as city neighborhoods have homes and shared spaces, the new neighborhood at work supports both individual and team work. The amount of space for each will vary, but they support people doing different types of work throughout the day. They help people make quick shifts and give people more options and autonomy over their day.

Fixed-to-Fluid

Great neighborhoods evolve when new people move in or a new store opens. At work, change is constant, sometimes in small ways as teams need to add more people, or in significant ways when they need more collaboration spaces. A hybrid neighborhood is modular and flexible — embracing change instead of resisting it.

Open + Enclosed

Privacy in the office has become even more important during the pandemic. People struggled with significantly open office plans before and now, after working from home, are even more sensitive to the need for control over their privacy. Great neighborhoods blend private and public spaces, making the neighborhood diverse and dynamic.

Braiding Digital + Physical

Urban planners are creating smart cities and hybrid office neighborhoods need to do the same. Video meetings are a new norm in the office and everyone needs to see and be seen, hear and be heard. The technology needs to be easy to use, but having a space that's the right size with the right features is a key to making it work.

It's time to put the needs of people in the forefront and think about the workplace in a whole new way. It is an investment in human capital that starts with understanding what matters most.

The latest Steelcase Global Report shares how work is fundamentally changing and why we need community at work.
