

## Balance is key to the design of co-working space

Experts debate topics ranging from design to the importance of wellness. Mitchell Labiak reports

Are desks dead? That was one of many bold questions posed at an event held at Workspace's newest co-working space, The Frames, last week.

The venue itself is an ambitious example of what both Angus Boag, development director at Workspace, and Henry Squire, architect of The Frames and partner at Squire & Partners, believe a workplace should be. It is designed to both stand out as a modern building and blend into its east London surroundings.

This is the reason for the arresting graffiti wall in The Frames' foyer (pictured). Painted by Bristolian graffiti artist Mr Jago, the work is supposedly a nod to Shoreditch's thriving graffiti scene.

"It's important for each building to relate to the area in which it is," explained Boag. "If people want to work around here, they want to work around here for a reason."

Rather than yet another catalyst for rampant gentrification, the building is, Boag said, a reaction to the way the area has changed.

"Just to the south of us, you can see the City is marching ever further northwards," he said. "There's a little bit of a clash of two kinds of cultures and two kinds of communities, so we had to be very careful about that."

While Shoreditch's makeover from working-class community to start-up capital of the UK certainly divides opinion, there's no denying there is a demand for co-working spaces in the area. According to Boag, The Frames is nearly 50% let despite being open for less than two months.

Yet Professor Rob Holdway, innovation director at Brunel University London, questioned the design of co-working spaces such as The Frames.

### Personal stamp

On the one hand, while the building's somewhat brutalist design is striking and uniquely Shoreditch, it might be problematic for businesses that want to put their personal stamp on where they work. On the other hand, creating a blank canvas for the businesses renting the space means making something anodyne and boring to look at.

Squire and Boag admitted that achieving a balance between these two aims was not easy, but they were confident of having done it. Not everyone



will necessarily agree with them, but the businesses that have rushed in to occupy this new co-working space evidently do.

Another key question the group discussed was how much work actually happens in the modern workplace. Squire stressed the need for employers and employees to get out of the mentality that walking into an office at 9am, sitting at a computer for eight hours and then leaving at 5.30pm necessarily counts as work.

Rather, he contended that work can happen through conversation and collaboration in well-designed breakout spaces - such as when colleagues bump into each other on their way to make coffee - as well as at a desk. It is in this spirit that Boag and Squire have designed The Frames.

"What we didn't want was for businesses to be behind closed doors," Boag maintained. "If you walk down the corridors, you'll see that there are lots and lots of windows so that you can see what's going on," he said.

Holdway agreed but emphasised that the key to the psychological shift needed to embrace better offices lies in the language we use. Boardrooms used to be called war rooms, he pointed out. By contrast,

the language of co-working spaces and flexible working is built around words such as collaboration and co-operation.

Of course, it's not just about ideas and language. All three agreed that a good workplace should have wellness physically engineered into it. Doing so involves taking some surprisingly simple measures: large windows create natural light; the right floorplan can encourage more walking; and increasing the amount of space for storing bikes means more people will cycle to work.

There is a solid return on investment for designing a workplace in such a way, Holdway argued. According to the Health and Safety Executive, 15.4 million working days a year are lost to mental ill health in the UK alone.

To wrap up, the trio looked to the future of workplaces as Helen Parton, freelance journalist and the debate's moderator, asked the crucial question: are desks dead?

Squire was not sure but was willing to make a prediction. "I don't believe in home working," he stated. For him, the joy of the workplace is connection, something that he does not believe technology could ever replace.

"I think it's great that people come together - either in a co-working space or in an office - and talk to each other as human beings." ■

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Henry Squire, Squire & Partners