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HOW SHOULD AFFORDABLE WORKSPACE BE DELIVERED IN THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE CITIES?



Experts from London, Singapore and New York share their views on lowering the cost of workplace access.

Affordable workspace is where innovation thrives. The start-up culture that began in Silicon Valley is now prevalent across the world, and a proven way to achieve business progress. But many of the world's cities are facing an **affordability problem**, and that squeeze on commercial space is leaving fledgling businesses in a bind. Co-working solves some of the problem, offering startups low initial costs and commitment. But as flexible workspace spreads to the periphery of urban centres, it's encroaching on the places where artists and non-profits traditionally operate. Their contributions to community and culture are under threat as they increasingly lack space they can secure long term. This is where city-wide frameworks, like the **Mayor of London's plan** to provide affordable workspace through the planning process, San Francisco's **Non-Profit Displacement Mitigation Programme**, and Lisbon's **Startup Lisboa** project, are also needed.

We asked experts in three of the world's most expensive places to set up a business to share strategies on how affordable workspace can be provided and protected.



Squire & Partners' The Department Store Studios is a four-storey contemporary workspace in London.

Tim Gledstone, partner at London-based architect Squire & Partners London doesn't lack affordable workspace; the required physical spaces exist but have yet to be unlocked. There is plenty of redundant and underused floorspace that could be adapted and shared to support entrepreneurs. The vast majority of businesses in London are small and medium enterprises (SMEs), responsible for almost 50 per cent of business turnover – it's essential that we continue to be creative in finding ways to support future innovation and for the capital to remain competitive on the global stage.

The onus is on every property owner to ensure their building assets are being used to maximum beneficial effect. It's no longer enough to be driven by profit alone. More affordable workspace could be created by utilizing office spaces during evenings/weekends, crossing overuses (such as desks within a hospitality setting outside of peak hours) and using technology to notify where individual desks, workshops, retail spaces are available at any moment within a local area. As digital nomads, we can be more opportunistic with underused spaces such as train stations and community centres – anywhere with Wi-Fi, power and a suitable platform for the task.

Neighbourhood workspace outside of central business areas (like Squire & Partners' The Department Store Studios) creates a cost-effective option, with

features [The Department Store Studios](#) creates a cost-effective option, with the added bonus of extending the economic ripple effect to local shops and businesses, and supporting shorter and more sustainable commutes. The new breed of flexible workspaces allows small companies to easily scale up or down, and often have 'all-in' costs which give certainty in terms of outgoings. Offices for entrepreneurs should also be led by access to collaborative networks - sharing skills and having support are invaluable assets to those just starting out.



The Department Store Studios offer flexible workspaces for growing businesses.

Nate Heasley, executive director of New York-based non-profit foundation All Good Work

My organization came about with the growth of co-working and what I saw as a solution for a lot of non-profit organizations facing the problem of having good office space that's affordable. I asked a friend if he would donate a desk in his co-working space to a non-profit, and he said sure. So I asked around more places and that was how the All Good Work Foundation began. By 2016, I realized the problem we were addressing was manifold: this issue of non-profits not being able to afford workspace close to the communities they serve, the organizations that they partner with; good workspace so employees have greater pride, comfort and satisfaction in their work. We started in New York, then expanded to California (where they are very much **at the forefront** of their thinking about non-profit displacement), and we're looking at Denver, Austin, Seattle and London, where the same kind of issues exist.

I haven't yet seen a successful example of building affordable workspace into the planning process. It would be great if there was a set-aside for every new building like **New York has for arts**, or **rent-stabilized sections** where a certain part of new housing development has to be affordable. That kind of program would probably solve the problem. Instead what we have is a patchwork of solutions. There are for-profit spaces like **Impact Hub**, who still have to charge a market rate to their members. Then there are large non-profit centres that get a tax advantage and can pass savings on to any non-profits sharing the space. Another model is sponsors donating buildings to non-profits who have to pay some of the underlying costs.

We take the approach of getting for-profit centres to donate between one to three per cent of their total space. That limits us to about four to six desks in any location and thus we're only able to serve small organizations, or remote teams of larger ones; however, people are increasingly interested in that sort of setup following the pandemic. There's also opportunity to take more space now as a lot of corporations are shedding some of their real estate, getting out of leases, or wanting to sublet some of their space that we could use as a micro-centre for our own non-profit community.





The interior designs focus on sustainability.

Narita Cheah, cofounder and director of Singapore-based design collective Paperspace

Singapore is commercially geared to support business, from small to large enterprises. There is a wide range of workspace, from semi-industrial facilities to Grade-A skyscrapers in the central business district. There are many affordable facilities in semi-industrial areas, those typically have limited public transportation access and few of the other urban amenities that are important to employees - young entrepreneurs need more than affordable workspace to thrive. Access to connected communities, talent attraction and high operating costs are some challenges that start-ups need to overcome.

Co-working can provide the flexibility for business flux, catering for expansion and contraction. Minimal or little upfront investment is needed to kit-out the office as the model is based on a pay-on-need basis. [Another way affordable workspace is provided in Singapore] is through incubator spaces that are initiated by the government to support the start-up ecosystem. For example, Block 71 and The Hangar by NUS Enterprise (the entrepreneurial arm of the National University of Singapore).

Access to a diversity of talent is key for any business, particularly in Singapore where the industry target audience expands across SEA (South East Asia). Start-up mindsets are moulded and shaped through environments and culture. Fostering relationships between entrepreneurs is an important factor to drive innovation synergies between people and communities. Social connections don't just happen and require intentional programming to draw people together and towards a common goal.

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