



FUTURE GAZING

Will we be sitting at desks in a big office building to do our work in 50 or even 20 years' time? **Johnny Tucker** reports from the latest FX design seminar where design experts gather to debate the issues



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Conrad Wildsmith
Associate &
senior workplace
consultant
Swanke Hayden
Connell Architects

The total blurring of work-life boundaries, both in terms of time and the spaces they happen in, the end of the office tower block and the need to create and facilitate interaction and live experiences in the future were all subjects which came up when our latest panel got together to look at what our lives will be like 20 and 50 years’ hence.

Will we ever be able to replace the visceral joy of getting covered in beer at an Oasis gig with a virtual experience or will the sheer convenience of not having to travel, queue up and get squashed take precedent? As cloud computing takes over, which brand will you trust to host your life, who will look after all your personal data: Tesco, Virgin, Coutts? And artificial intelligence? We can already be fooled into thinking we’re interacting with a person when it’s actually a computer, so at what point are we no longer in control?

This latest debate was hugely animated and wide-ranging, as you can see. And from the beginning, and at the core of the discussion, was always the issue of how we will work in the future. ‘To put it crudely, what happens in the building might have changed quite a bit and be changing quite radically but the box that it happens in hasn’t really changed,’ said Swanke Hayden Connell Architects

director, Jason Turner. ‘And ultimately, do you need the box at all? Do you need a corporate HQ that’s four million sq ft of multimillion-pound office space, all designed to try to facilitate people spending less time in it?’

Conrad Wildsmith, associate and senior workplace consultant at SHCA, widened the argument: ‘You’ve got whole cities full of buildings. It’s how they are used and what happens in them. We’re at a crucial point where things are absolutely changing because of technology. I take my iPad with me because I have everything I could need at any time for projects. I can do the whole presentation from it and can link it through to a big screen.

‘And younger people coming through are using things like iPads in schools and everything’s online. We grew up with paper and it’s a wrench to get rid of it. I still have a pen with me now even though I actually don’t have a piece of paper.’

Ron Sidell, partner at Sidell Gibson, suggested: ‘The city could all be one big coffee bar.’ He added: ‘I think we need to communicate with other people face to face. No matter how clever we are with technology, we’ve got to reinvent the way we meet each other. We want to get out, we want to meet people, and talk to them.’

Turner pointed out that current office floor plans really didn’t facilitate

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Ron Sidell
partner
Sidell Gibson

that way of working very well and that was something that will change, adding: ‘I think you’re right, people always will need to be face to face – but the question is, do you need to be face to face with your colleagues necessarily? They’re all coming to the same building at the same times of day and companies are saying to us, “but our staff don’t talk to each other”; they don’t communicate.’

Wildsmith agree, adding: ‘What I think is quite interesting is this whole thing about space dictating the way people act. We’re traditionally sat at a desk because it was the most appropriate environment. It was process driven – then you had computers and you had a corner for the computer. Now with things like iPads and small notebook PCs, a desk feels completely wrong. It doesn’t feel right to sit at a desk typing on one of these anymore.’

‘Now we’re in a situation where actually sitting in a comfortable chair or in more home-like environments feels right with this new kind of technology. You wouldn’t get a book and sit at a desk to read it. So when you’re talking about traditional open-plan spaces, in 50 years’ time, there aren’t going to be rows of desks because it’s just not the right environment.’

The conversation turned to foreseeing the end of large office

tower blocks – though they could be repurposed for other things – before moving on to how technology such as cloud computing – remote information and application storage and usage – already sees people moving out of the main office and into the city.

‘Well I think Starbucks touched on something when it created this notion of the third space,’ said Fitch’s creative director, Stuart Wood. ‘We’re seeing authors writing best-selling books from a coffee shop, whereas that craft used to be much more isolated, sitting at home. There’s a coffee shop just opened up in Shoreditch that has a whole section just for workers. It’s designed for working – it’s not designed for drinking coffee.’

‘I think there will be a lot more collective industry in 20 years’ and 50 years’ time. I think there will be a much more participatory culture where specialism starts to rule a little bit; generalism dies and you’ll be associating with other specialists who can help you and you can help them.’

Wildsmith pointed out that this was almost a return to the era of guilds, where areas grew up in London dedicated to one trade or profession, and this can already be seen happening outside the obvious financial district of the City, in areas such as Shoreditch and Clerkenwell. It was also pointed out that the idea of doing all of your

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Creative director
Fitch

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‘One thing about brands, which is really interesting and we didn’t really touch on the icloud discussion earlier, is – who is going to host everyone’s personal data? Maybe it will be Marks and Spencer or the Post Office. This is the logical next data step, and then who do you go with, who do you trust? Maybe you can only afford the Tescos of this world’



David Pierce
Architectural
assistant
Urban Salon

business in a coffee shop harked back to the 18th-century model.

But very much in the 21st century, if not beyond, the conversation returned to the lack of physical place in the future and how the disappearing office blocks won’t be needed to give a company a high brand profile, aid in attracting staff or provide a work base. This then moved on to wider branding issues.

‘One thing about brands, which is really interesting and we didn’t really touch on the icloud discussion earlier, is – who is going to host everyone’s personal data?’ opined Urban Salon architectural assistant David Pearce. ‘Maybe it will be Marks and Spencer or the Post Office. This is the logical next data step, and then who do you go with, who do you trust? Maybe you can only afford the Tescos of this world.’

Looking towards a world where most shopping is done online, GE Lighting’s design and application general manager EMEA Simon Fisher countered: ‘But would you trust Tesco if it got rid of all its high street stores and was only an online retailer? Psychologically there’s something that says, as it’s on every corner: it’s big and safe and will be around forever. If you take that real estate away and you do it all virtually, it’s not tangible. Do you then trust the brand?’

Wildsmith parried: ‘Do you trust Amazon? Fundamentally, would everyone round the table here pretty much trust Amazon?’ A quick show of hands proved they did.

While briefly touching on the future of shopping and how there will always be a market for personal service and visceral products such as food and clothing for smell, taste and touch, time and time again the conversation turned to the power of technology and how it is transforming the way we work and how we are entertained.

In the short term, GE Lighting’s OEM director Eddie Guest pointed out that ‘It’s currently all about power and lighting. Look at electric cars: they now have stations that you park at. It’s like an electric toothbrush – no direct connection, but electro-magnetic charging.’ Battery life means that people can now go for pretty much the whole day without having to plug in their mobile devices, which is really changing the current landscape.

And those devices are becoming ever-more powerful and capable: ‘I’m a musician, and music has been blown apart by technology,’ said Wildsmith. ‘I’ve got a studio on my iPad that would have cost me £50,000 15 years ago. On my Mac, I have one that would have cost £300,000. They sound exactly like the real thing.

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Eddie Guest
OEM director
GE Lighting

agree this is so much more convenient and cheaper, and it's portable, that we'll never go back to the way we did things before.'

And moving on through 3D visuals to holographic presentation, everyone agreed this will completely change the way we take our entertainment as again convenience wins out over the real experience, though most agreed there's nothing like experiencing music or paintings first-hand, but perhaps that will become a luxury experience in the future?

'I went to see Oasis in Wembley last year and I got beer thrown on me, people were whacking me with their elbows and it was crazy,' said GE's Simon Fisher. 'But that was the experience; that was the humanity of it all.' And that brought the discussion back around to the issue of isolation and having to deliberately create points of interaction in the future.

Fitch's Stuart Wood added: 'We look at trends all the time and we just did something called Liveage: we asked 3,500 people, and 70 per cent of them believed they are becoming more and more disconnected from reality. So while we can do more online, people are feeling more and more alienated and disconnected.'

'What we're noticing with Liveage is how we're using the internet and digital communications to actually facilitate live experiences. That's a really interesting thing.'

And while the conversation was in this slightly dystopian future mode the focus turned to artificial intelligence. 'As AI increases, how much of the [interior] design role will be done by computers?' asked Wildsmith. 'There was an article recently about artificial intelligence getting to the point where it can simulate human interaction. They did a test and the computers won: the people couldn't tell that they were talking to a computer.'

Ron Sidell mused: 'Where's that heading? I think the person creating it is in charge of the process and I'm not threatened at all. I think that there's just more and more kit that I can use. And I hope it will be the same with artificial intelligence; it will be a program that I can create with and control. I hope I'll always be in charge ultimately.'

Ominously, Wildsmith countered: 'That is the question – ultimately, will we be in charge?' And at that point the holographic discussion panel ended, the once crystal-clear three-dimensional panel-member avatar images turning to white noise as they disbanded to the four continents from which they had jacked into the FX infocast.

Actually, that's not true, the discussion carried on for quite some time, everyone sitting face to face around a wooden table in a large office block, but we just haven't got space for that here, maybe in the future... ■

THE PANEL

Arup Lighting / Arfon Davies / associate director

Cherrill Scheer Associates / Cherrill Scheer / director

Fitch / Stuart Wood / creative director

FX / Theresa Dowling / editor

GE Lighting / Simon Fisher / design and application general manager EMEA

GE Lighting / Eddie Guest / OEM director

Sidell Gibson / Ron Sidell / partner

Swanke Hayden Connell

Architects / Jason Turner / director /

Swanke Hayden Connell

Architects / Conrad Wildsmith /

associate & senior workspace consultant

Urban Salon / David Pierce /

architectural assistant



This visionary FX Design Seminar was inspired by Jason and Conrad from SHCA who helped set the agenda of the complex ways we could all be working in 2061. It was hosted at their recently completed interior design project, the new KPMG headquarters in Canary Wharf, London which has now won the BCO regional category for best corporate workplace 2011. Originally featured in March issue of FX after £340m of investment, the premises have become home to 4,000 KPMG staff, so it was a grateful FX editor who could stage this design seminar in a topical project. Thank you KPMG.

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