



Right & opposite page | Macquarie Group: Innovative workplace design promotes a sense of community amongst colleagues

WHAT NOW FOR THE OFFICE?

With digital technology making the nomadic worker increasingly common, Barry Jenkins suggests that for the communal workplace to retain its significance, the office must offer more than filing cabinets and become a stimulating cultural hub

The internet is now 20 years old and has become an essential resource, rich in content, creating “space” for us to make endless connections. As a result, we are bound to a global “community” through a range of common interests, web searches and social media.

We occupy spaces on the internet that seamlessly cross from work to recreation, and from commerce to learning, covering all areas of human activity. In the physical world, conversely, spaces tend to be defined by purpose, such as school, office or home. The flexibility of ‘virtual spaces’ appeals to the way we now manage our time and the way we balance activities. But as internet users, do we really feel part of a community? Does the internet imbue a sense of citizenship, or does it promote anonymity and isolation?

Community is generally defined by geography and implies a sense of common purpose. Whether considered on a national or regional basis, community gives rise to cultures that define who we are, our values, and traditions. Culture and community establishes a sense of identity and purpose. So whilst the

benefits of flexible, nomadic working connects with an enlightened regard for work-life balance, not having somewhere to touch down at work may lead to a lack of identity and purpose.

The future of work will be influenced by a combination of globalisation and technology. It will also define the available workforce. Being connected to all parts of the

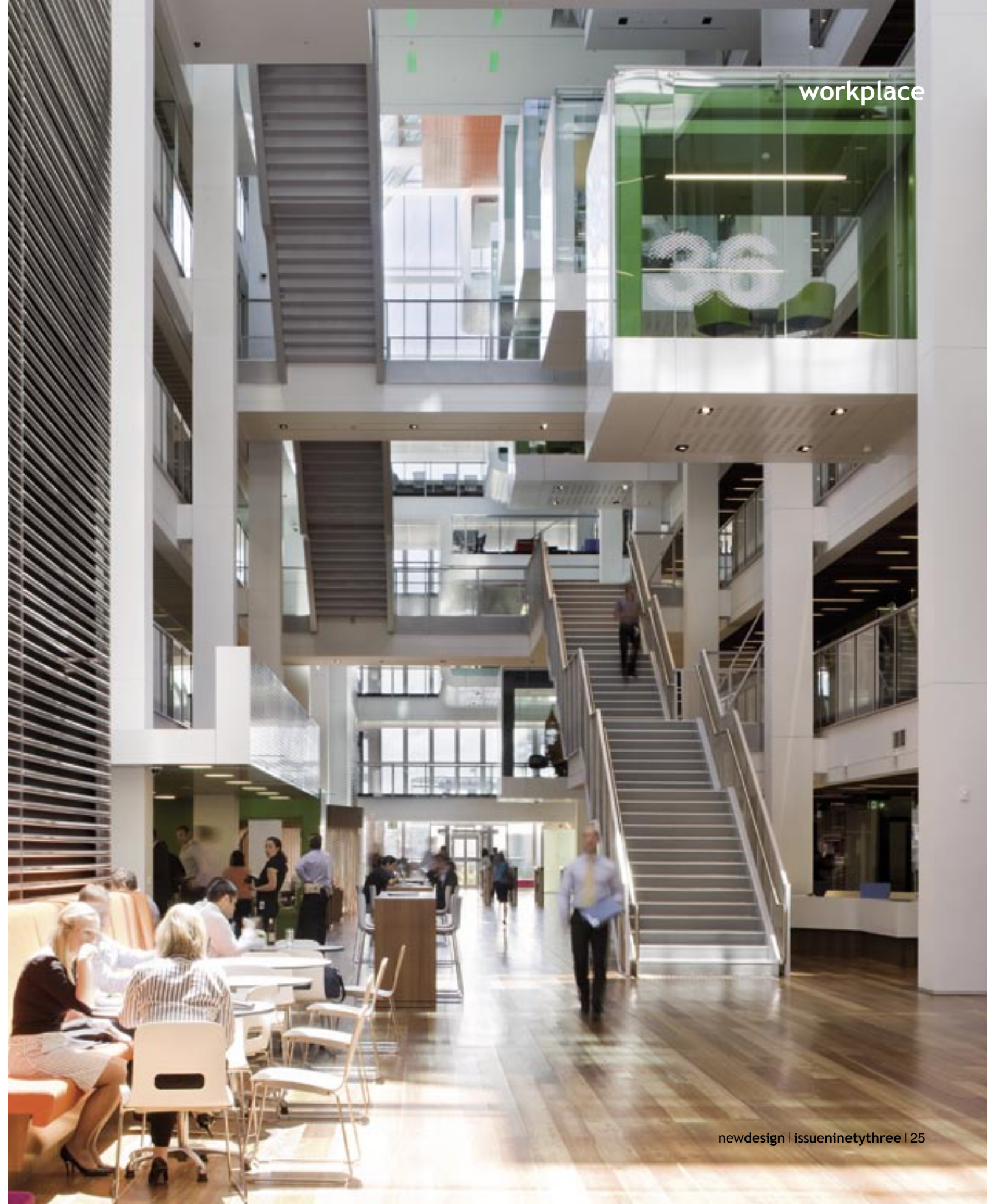
The future of work will be influenced by globalisation and technology

globe, our working day is no longer nine to five, and work does not have to be within a reasonable commute of home. But it is hard to really make firm predictions about the future, as external forces like the global economy will inevitably play a part in shaping it. Even though new ways of working do not suit everyone, mobility is increasing. Whether due to an increase in self-employment, or due to new work practices being adopted corporately, it is estimated that by 2013, 50.3

percent of the workforce in Western Europe will be mobile workers. So if work becomes more solitary, how can cultures be nurtured with less physical interaction? How can we draw stimulus from others and how socialised will we be as individuals?

The challenge here is that despite the benefits of nomadic or home working, being part of a connected “global” society means that competition will increase, and it will no longer be confined by geography. So in order to compete globally, innovation and creativity is becoming the most important characteristic of the knowledge economy. Whilst the traditional view of success at work is a combination of personal drive and ambition, it will make way for a subtle blend of being supremely good at something, and leveraging our own unique networks.

The idea of an authentic culture is hard to comprehend if it were only to reside virtually. Employers increasingly recognise that in the knowledge economy, people are seen as an asset and not a cost. With community having currency in the workplace context at present, if we compare the spaces and functions of the





Left | Stimulating work environments at the BBC's Media City in Salford Quays. Photography by Will Pryce. Main | Soft furnishings bring home comforts to the office



workplace

Work and life for many are no longer completely exclusive

workplace with those of a town or city, the basic human need to form settlements that grew into cities was initially for survival, but ultimately for prosperity. Cities are physical manifestations of human activity, identified through landmarks, heritage and traditions. Public spaces support interaction, which leads to commerce and innovation. In contrast, neighbourhoods are where people reside, retreating to private spaces for recuperation and emotional nourishment.

This idea of creating dedicated spaces in the workplace to establish one's own territory (neighbourhood), and then public space for interaction (market square), has been explored before in the design of workplaces. Vitra's net 'n' nest concept shown at Orgatec in 2008 is a good example. As an approach, it captures the need at work to have somewhere to call home, a nest, but also recognises that social interaction and networking, the net, is vital for stimulation. The driver here ultimately is efficiency, placing value on a worker's wellbeing as a function of productivity.

Net 'n' nest stemmed from a project in 1991 called 'Citizen Office', when Andrea Branzi, Michele de Lucchi and Ettore Sottsass considered ways to remove the limitations of what they saw as "one-dimensional office environments". The work became the subject of an exhibition at the Vitra Design Museum and is used today to express the importance Vitra places on the role of physical environments in a digital world, where we have greater freedom to work when, where and how

we choose. Citizen Office and "citizenship" implies rights and privileges as well as responsibilities. It underlines trust, which is seen as a founding principle of the future workplace. With the shift from hierarchal structures of the past - based on command and control, the digital age and the consequence of nomadic or remote working - trust becomes more implicit between employer and employee.

To reflect this cultural shift and to leverage the benefits that technology and new attitudes to work offer, the modern workspace should express qualities that foster unique cultures. Creating a destination that offers settings and opportunities not found at home, will attract talented people. The design of a workplace should therefore define a cultural hub or market place and not just somewhere to keep the filing and house a workforce between nine and five.

On that basis, a number of innovative workplace schemes have emerged. The BBC's Media City in Salford Quays is one example designed by ID:SR. Here the BBC wanted to celebrate their supreme creativity as a national broadcaster and to embrace smarter ways to deliver multi-platform content in a new media age. Another example is the Macquarie Group in Sydney, where a complete change in corporate culture has been delivered through an innovative approach to the design of their new Shelley Street HQ. It has provided benefits to the people who use it through flexibility and improved wellbeing. In addition efficiency has improved along with genuine savings in operational costs, energy and paper consumption.

But despite some persuasive statistics, it is unlikely this workplace utopia will suit everyone or be financially justifiable for some companies. The Macquarie Group story is well-supported by information that appeals to both the head and the heart. Yet we know that even though technology exists to make the paperless office a reality, it will be habit and dogma that prevents it. We also know that with the state of the economy, office refurbishment can be deferred. This creates tough market conditions for manufacturers of office products, squeezing prices and in some

cases reduces market differentiation.

However, if you consider the most pressing issues, such as environmental sustainability, globalisation, demographics and technology, those engaged in the development of our workplaces face a significant period of change and opportunity. There are financial and ecological imperatives to improve efficiency in all aspects of the workplace, including the products and environments developed to support it. There is significant social change needing fresh thinking and entrepreneurial determination to prepare the workforce for the future.

Then there is the freedom and connectivity that technology and communications provide to enable us to work smarter.

But if we return to the idea of a city, we need to consider buildings and infrastructures that define the environments in which we work. Here we can see a disconnection between cultural change and financial expediency. Certainly there are some interesting new office buildings - designed mainly as landmarks, whilst inside they are generic spaces that suit adaptation for a range of future uses - subject to the peaks and troughs

of the property cycle.

In looking at the future of work, work-life balance is often seen as the pivotal issue: two distinct spheres that need to be reconciled or separated. But work and life for many are no longer completely exclusive, so maybe we need subtle environments and infrastructure that manage the transition as seamlessly as the spaces we occupy on the internet. ■

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