THE THINK SERIES 03

Introduction by Orms

As a practice, Orms is keen to understand the everyday issues and challenges faced by both the architectural profession and our colleagues and clients in the wider construction industry. The Think initiative supports our belief that the best way of doing this is through debate and research, the outcomes of which will ultimately inform our architectural approach.

What follows is the result of the first stage in the Think process – a frank, informal and fascinating dialogue between some of the people we most admire in the industry, drawn from a wide variety of disciplines and representing many different sides of the debate. Their lively insights are highly thought-provoking and, inevitably, raise more questions than they answer. But they successfully highlight the conflicting issues which will influence the future development of workplace buildings – and identify many new avenues for debate and design exploration.

The guests

Oliver Bennett (OB) is a journalist, editor and lecturer based in London and East Anglia. He has written for many national newspapers and specialist magazines on property and architecture. He has also written a book on placemaking and public art

Sonny Hasan (SH) is a founder member and current vice-chair of the Workplace Consulting Organisation. He recently left CBRE, where he was a director for over nine years, leading the Workplace Consultancy Team advising organisations on workplace trends, portfolio optimisation and workplace strategies. He is now a consultant

Emily Prideaux (EP) is a leasing surveyor at Derwent London. She originally trained and qualified with Knight Frank as a West End Office Agent. After five years she moved to CBRE in Canada in the investment side of the business, working mainly for European investors in Canada and the US

Sam Sheterline (SS) is group account director at ODD, an independent creative house based in Old Street, London. He currently works with some of the world's leading fashion and lifestyle brands

Ziona Strelitz (ZS) is an anthropologist, planner, design strategist and founder director of ZZA Responsive User Environments. She specialises in empirical research and advisory work to shape projects that address the 'people proposition' in responsive and sustainable ways. Her projects span study and practice at the intersection of physical and virtual activity, space and place, across a range of scales

Chris Watkin (CW) is co-founder of the specialist agency Bluebook which advises landlords on the redevelopment, refurbishment and reletting of commercial office space

The hosts

Oliver Richards (OR) founded Orms in 1984 and his skills in balancing the visionary qualities of design with practicality and cost consciousness are central to the philosophy of the practice

Melanie Martin (MM) joined Orms in 2003 and was made associate in 2013. She has worked on a wide variety of projects with the practice, covering the commercial, education, leisure and residential sectors. In all her work she adopts a holistic approach, seeking to understand how light and space affect the human experience

Jane Stead (JS) joined Orms as an associate in 2012, following several years working at DEGW. With a background in interior design, she has worked on fit-out projects within the the corporate, public and learning sectors in Europe, the Middle East and Asia Pacific. She is also a member of the Workplace Consulting Organisation, a think tank which supports and sponsors continuing research into workplace trends

OFFICE LIFE
A DISCUSSION ON THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACES

Continuing the collaboration between British practice Orms and the AR, the Think Series aims to promote dialogue between different disciplines within architecture and construction. In this third edition we explore the issues shaping the debate on the future of workplaces

Contending with the impact of technology, geography, and commerce, the conventional nine-to-five workplace is in a state of cultural flux, evolving to meet new client and user expectations. But in an increasingly networked world, is there still a role for physical spaces, and by implication, architecture and design?

OR: Can I put forward six ideas for us to talk about? The first one is about technological change, what it enables, and where it is going, because I think there are some really exciting things happening, such as thin film batteries and noise cancelling devices. Second, personal expectations about the workplace environment which have changed radically. Third, out of town versus in town. Our first two buildings were out of town, but now there is a major shift towards town centres because of the quality of the environment, the quality of add-on spaces and the general human experience. Fourth, money. At the moment we are going through this ourselves because we had a really good deal on our offices for a long time. When this comes to an end it makes you think about where you spend your money – on people, salary, technology, and how densely you use space. Item five, flexibility, because our whole approach to flexibility has changed in terms of lease structures and how much people are prepared to pay for flexibility. Finally, the suitability of existing buildings and sustainability, because I don't think we measure sustainability in a true sense, we just tend to think about the micro scale. The reuse of buildings is an enormously sustainable thing to do. So let's open up the debate.

ZS: I agree with you about sustainability. Kings Place in London is a good example, a really game-changing project because it suggests sustainability in a much more holistic way than any current evaluational rating. It's also connected with the curation of the urban realm – when do you decide to keep something, and when is it OK, given the embodied energy in any structure, to throw it away? The original structures on the site were industrial and distribution buildings, constructed relatively recently. In this case, I made a very compelling argument that the utility derived from a new building, which sweats the site very productively, both physically and in terms of seven-day-a-week usage, more than justified taking down something that was already there, though with extremely limited utility.

'The idea that the world is all about net to gross to generate value is an outdated framework'
ZIONA STRELITZ

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OR: Interestingly, the University of the Arts is just across the road, where they have taken the opposite approach, brilliantly using old buildings, and putting a university at the heart of a major development, as a force for energy and enthusiasm and belief in the future.

ZS: It wasn't part of the Kings Place central strategy to have the university at its heart; it arrived serendipitously.

EP: At Derwent London, we generally try to refurbish as opposed to build new. In terms of tick-box sustainability, there is no framework yet that really works for a genuine refurbishment, as opposed to a new-build, in terms of the goals and how you meet them.

OR: There used to be a huge difference in capital value between a new building and a refurbished building, and it seems to me that those perceptions have changed.

CW: It's down to a combination of the quality of current refurbishments, the architectural thought and also the market. London in particular is a very constrained area for investors, with limited stock.

ZS: I want to come back to square footage as a criterion. When I first took a developer client to see the finished Kings Place, the guy stood there and looked at it, and said 'Well it's very attractive, but with all this generous space in the atrium, it's clear your client didn't have a clue as to what he was doing'. And I said 'Really? When The Guardian first expressed interest in moving here, it was because the cultural proposition of this building speaks exactly to the Scott Trust's values. I was confident that they wouldn't find an equivalent anywhere else.' And that's what happened – they moved in, and they very effectively use the building's spaces both in their own demise and those that are publicly accessible. The idea that the world is all about net to gross to generate value is an outdated framework.

EP: Money is always running in the background because that has to work, but what we also hear more of now is about how people feel in a space. It's not just about the boring and the practical, but about wellbeing; the environment you are creating. So it's not just about the office floor you are standing on, but the whole environment surrounding you.

CW: There is still a slightly old-fashioned view from some developers that it is about creating square footage. But you have to create a space that the occupier wants to be in. It comes back to the environment in which people want to work. The whole circle continues to turn, but there are still some very old-fashioned views out there about squeezing. We get this as project teams; you are always trying to squeeze out the absolute maximum net internal output. It doesn't make it a better building.

THE RISE OF GENERATION Y
Demographic change will have a profound influence on the future shape of workplaces. Notions of fluidity, connectivity and flexibility are increasingly important to the emerging younger generation, whose working lives and experiences will be very different to those of their parents

OR: Sam, as representative of Generation Y, what matters for your generation?

SS: We've recently been going through a relocation ourselves, and have been in a property that was probably taken on cost grounds rather than what it gave us as a creative agency. We are moving out in the next three or four weeks. What we felt was really important was having a space that didn't divide the creative team and our accounts department. For us having a totally blank canvas and open space – that was really key.

OR: Are you unique in this, or do you think your generation are better communicators?

SS: I don't think so. I'm worried watching my seven- and eight-year-old nieces and nephews on car journeys – all they do is zone out on the iPad or games machine. But for us as a creative agency, physical space needs to stimulate collaboration. We have get-togethers, brain storms, we need break-out areas, we need flexibility, but we also need quiet time. I think it's a mix between somewhere you can get your head down and work, almost in silence so there is no interruption, and somewhere you can play. For us, days are long, and it feels like your work day is a social part of your life. That's something that is quite attractive to anyone who walks through the building. They want to see the culture created by those communal spaces.

CW: Isn't it true that home, work and social lives are much more merged than they ever were? The old nine to five, when you come in, you do your work and go home is now a redundant model, particularly in the more creative sectors. People want to be working in an environment where they can spill from home, to work, to socialising. And because some meetings are more informal and sociable, you can easily move from a break-out area to a coffee shop or a bar.

SS: It's hard to say where creative ideas will be found. More often than not they are formulated outside the workspace and then generated and grown within a work environment through the impetus of collaboration.

OR: Turning to more serious professions, such as lawyers and accountants, rather than the creative industries. Do you think their expectations about what they want to get out of their work life and their work environment will change?

SH: I recently attended the Workplace Trends conference at the Royal College of General Practitioners headquarters on Euston Road. It's a listed building that has been imaginatively remodelled to create wonderful working and social spaces. In terms of working environments and image it brings organisation into the 21st century. GPs I have spoken to see it as a great leap forward for their profession. I have been in discussions with my GP regarding how he would like to engage with his patients. He sees technology as the way forward, connecting with patients over the internet, over the phone using FaceTime, to make him more accessible.

ZS: I think every sector is using technology to rethink ways of delivering services. We do a lot of work with the Home Office and in the police sector, and there are all

1. (Previous page) office development by Orms at 95 Wigmore Street in London's West End for Great Wigmore Partnership which explores fundamental ideas about robustness and adaptability in the same way as the Victorians
2. The new Guardian offices at Kings Place by Dixon Jones explore a more holistic approach to sustainability. The building has also catalysed the wider redevelopment of the surrounding area
3. The headquarters of the Royal College of General Practitioners is a listed building imaginatively renovated by Harmsen Tilney Shane to create dramatic and interactive working and social spaces

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sorts of changes with virtual courts and bail arrangements that waste less time making journeys to places for things that are unnecessary. Although these new models have yet to be fully evaluated, it's a very healthy experimentation. Higher education is another example. So you have Harvard putting a whole curriculum online for free, and you see colleges that you may not even know of in the UK using distance learning. It's a very fluid time, with lots of opportunities.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Location has always been a critical factor in workplace development, intrinsically related to cost and amenity. Though business parks used to be seen as the future, increasingly, inner-city neighbourhoods are now being recolonised, driven by the experiential need to be at the heart of things rather than isolated on the periphery

EP: When I first began in an agency, 10 years ago, there were definite location boundaries and little flexibility. Now those boundaries are much less defined. Occupiers are much more footloose in terms of where they will be. They are much more product-led. There is an arc forming around London. The same occupier who is looking at King's Cross will also be looking at Farringdon and Paddington. Not because they are particularly wedded to any of those areas, but because they all are in what is perceived as mid-market, around £40-60 per sq ft mark, where the rates are still reasonable. It's a combination of product and price. Occupiers are much more footloose in terms of where they are looking.

CW: It also goes back to lifestyle. The hedge funds, the money guys, are now much more concentrated in Soho, because the cool bars are in Soho, the cool coffee shops are in Soho. They don't want to be in a mainstream coffee shop, they want to be in an artisan one.

MM: This holistic approach is driving a larger agenda in terms of what people want, especially in respect of creating communities within buildings. The age profile of many big companies is now surprisingly young and though many tried the out-of-town thing, there is strong evidence that they are coming straight back. Because 25-year-old coders don't want to be in a campus somewhere off the M25, they want to be right in the middle of London, they want to be exactly where it is happening.

EP: We saw it with people like Nokia and Coca Cola coming back into town. The 25-year-old talent pool is here in London.

ZS: It's the same trend in San Francisco with people moving out of the Valley into downtown San Francisco. There's a strong move by social media companies into re-purposed city centre space.

JS: But we've had this trend over the last 20 years of moving from the business park to the city centre. Will this continue, or will there be a reverse to that trend in future?

OB: Presumably there will be a price point issue?

JS: The two reasons that have been cited for the shift from business park to city centre are better accessibility to 24/7 amenities, and also the reduction in carbon footprint from people using public transport rather than cars. So the

'This holistic approach is driving a larger agenda in terms of what people want, especially in respect of creating communities within buildings'
MELANIE MARTIN

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question is, whether the increased availability of electric cars and an improved working environment, will encourage a shift back to out-of-centre locations?

EP: London always has to be regarded as a different case. It's its own state. I don't see that happening at the moment. Occupiers have really changed in the way they approach things. Everything is centred on their people. Companies want staff retention, they want their staff to be happy. It ties in with the technology point, that boundaries between work and home just don't exist any more. The day doesn't stop. People want to be in an environment they also consider as home. Our Tea Building in Shoreditch is a great example of an environment in its own right. There are 35 tenants ranging from 100 sq ft occupiers, to 20,000 sq ft occupiers. There is a Tea website, a Tea chat room and all the tenants know each other. They are constantly interacting and asking us to find more communal space.

MM: It's like a city on a small scale, and I think that's the beauty of London, having that buzz around.

TRANSFORMATIONAL CONNECTIVITY

The pace of technological change is redefining the relationship between people and work. Faster and better connectivity makes for a more agile and increasingly nomadic workforce which has implications for the physical form and location of their workplaces

SH: Five or 10 years from now, technology connectivity and commoditisation will have advanced considerably, so the real question is: why do I need to spend an hour commuting, coming into town? That's a key question for larger organisations. Why would they want to pay premium rents in the city when a large number of their workforce, provided they have choice, aren't fussed where they work from any more? People might want to have a sense of belonging, to be able to come back to a base, but do you really need these large headquarters for organisations to survive?

CW: It gets debated every time there is a change in technology of some sort, like the working from home argument.

OR: To date that hasn't really happened. Ideas still happen face to face, standing around the water cooler. Sitting at home connected is not the same kind of dynamic.

EP: Companies who specifically provide shared workspaces are very successful. They act as incubators. Individuals don't want to be operating individually, they want to be part of these memberships. They want to go somewhere, so the demand for these operations is now escalating. People want to be a part of something, they don't want to be at home operating from their bedroom.

ZS: I think it's very diverse. In 2011, we did a big international study of why people work in third places – coffee shops, libraries, business centres and lounges. And there were scenarios like a student who came in from Brooklyn every day to the same Starbucks in Manhattan, because that's where he felt connected and 'at home' working. Coffee shops were full of customers like that, and there was a sense that people would be looking out for each other – like watching each others' laptops when they went outside for a break. The ecology of the whole thing works. ZZA's also done a lot of work with Cisco. Here, people may come into the office, though their teams are

4. Fresh and informal working environment for Landor Communications, where the work day feels part of your social life
5. 20 Gracechurch Street, London by Orms converts and recasts City offices. In terms of overall life-cycle costing, the reuse of buildings is generally a more sustainable strategy
6. Next headquarters in Leicestershire, 1987 by Orms. Even though improved connectivity means workers need not necessarily spend time together in a physical office, ideas still tend to happen face to face

7. The roof garden at Millennium Bridge House for Carlyle by Orms. People will spend more time in their offices if they enjoy the environment
8. Stephen Street for Derwent London by Orms. The most enduring kinds of workplaces create simple, flexible spaces that have lasting integrity
9. The Tea Building in Shoreditch for Derwent London by AHMM which now hosts a range of different tenants in a former tea warehouse

OR: I think toys don't necessarily make people happy, but if you take a city council you are going to have a very different workforce compared with an advertising agency in London.

ZS: We need to be more granular about that range, but I think everybody is looking for authenticity. If a table tennis table is authentic in one community, maybe just a very comfortable set of sofas would do the job somewhere else, or a knitting club. Spaces need to facilitate people to work out their own activities and clubs, and technology is hugely helpful for that.

CREATIVE OCCUPIERS AND GOOD DESIGN
In light of the competing demands of occupiers and wider currents of change, the discussion concluded that the most appealing and enduring kinds of workplaces were generally those that provided robust and flexible spaces, drawing parallels with Victorian building stock

EP: The best that probably can be done is to provide the most functional blank canvas for an occupier to go in and put their stamp on. Because everyone has a different stamp and everyone is going to want to use it differently. To create a space that has the flexibility to suit a spectrum of occupiers.

OR: The Victorians built wonderful industrial buildings, and I'm sure they had no perception about how flexible they would be for living and working. Fundamentally they built simple, flexible buildings, they thought about fundamentals, good daylight, a robust commodity.

SH: I want to revisit an interesting point. As developers, do you need to start rethinking what you are actually delivering to your customer, and as an agent do you think there is another way of trying to market buildings?

CW: It's an interesting question: whether you deliver shell and core, whether you deliver shell and floor, whether you do all sorts of different things. In certain locations you have to do certain things. But in different markets, in the more creative sectors, they want more of the shell and core, they want more input, they want options.

EP: We have always said and assumed that the media guys want this, and the finance guys want this, but those boundaries are coming down. Everyone is now more open to something new, something different. People want to be seen to be doing something unique

CW: You can't pigeon-hole anyone now in terms of specification or in terms of location. Everything is moving so quickly that you just have to try and keep up as best you can.

CW: But ultimately good design doesn't mean creative occupiers. Good design is good design.

MM: Everything comes back to the fundamentals of good design and to hold your ground in terms of creating strong, simple space that has an integrity and a quality to it that will stand the test of time, whatever changes might go on. We can't predict where technology is going to go.

OR: We just know it is going to change things.

all in different places – Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, wherever. They look like they are working by themselves, but they're in active dialogue with their teams, in different time zones, continents apart.

OB: Offices have had a continuing evolution. In the 1940s and '50s it was the office as action space, then there was the office as the living room, and now we have the office as the child's bedroom. Is it the iconoclastic that is changing the attitude towards work, or is it more fundamental?

EP: I think a lot of those big companies would say that indirectly it adds to productivity. People will spend more hours in their office if they enjoy the environment. If they can stay and do the extracurricular things, or go and have a game of table tennis and a beer at the end of the day, they are still there, they are still with their colleagues.

ZS: I want to challenge that from a research base. For a long time I was a judge of the BCO Awards, and I saw with the dot-com boom, and all the witty expressive lines that you would expect an agency or a company to generate to attract this new generation of people. A lot of it has settled down, and yes, there are organisations where people work really long hours, and need varied internal spaces for a change in scene. In almost all workplaces now, there's some need for settings to support activity-based working – in different modes. But through our research, it's clear there are many office populations who aren't interested in the workplace 'toys' or too much amenity inside the building. It has no traction for them – people have a life outside work that they want to live too.