

Should you return to the office? There's no one-size-fits-all answer

Over the past few months architectural practices have had to adapt to remote working and Zoom and its like have grown in importance, *writes Kunle Barker*. As with the adoption of CAD in previous years, practices that have flourished have adapted quickly. However, unlike CAD, remote working is not seen as an inevitable evolution, but a necessity brought about by unprecedented circumstances.

So should practices return to the office? Last month Twitter said all its staff could work remotely forever, while Netflix founder Reed Hastings said he saw no positive effects from working from home and wants his staff to return. These contrasting opinions can be attributed to the nature of the work carried out by these companies. Functional roles requiring little collaborative input from colleagues can easily be carried out remotely. However, creativity does invite, and in some cases demand, input from others. So, while these decisions may be straightforward for some companies, for architects the decision is much more complex, as the architectural role has elements of both function and creativity.

East London practice White Red Architects adopted a hybrid solution. 'We decided to take our own space, instead of sharing,' says Dicky Lewis, founder of the 15-strong firm. Last month the practice moved out of its co-working premises into a private office (*pictured*). The new base provides a collaborative space while still allowing staff to work remotely. 'It allows us more flexibility and provides a safe environment for staff. We have also dedicated the front of the office to model-making and presentations,' says Lewis.

For others, the overwhelming success of remote working, with its flexibility, efficiencies, and cost savings for both employer and employee, have cast doubt on when, or even whether, they will return to the office. Studio Gbolade founder Tara Gbolade says: 'We have no plans to return to our office in the foreseeable future and will reassess in a few months.' Studio Gbolade, which has five staff, left its offices at the start of lockdown and has enjoyed unforeseen benefits. 'We found that a lot of our public sector clients are quite keen on remote working; it fits their current working philosophy,' Says Gbolade. 'We've managed to collaborate with



WHITE RED ARCHITECTS

other practices more easily than ever, as there is no need to travel as much.' However, architecture is an industry that prides itself – indeed relies – on the ability of senior architects to train, nurture, and tutor younger ones, a goal hard to achieve remotely. Kaldon Smith, technical director of 24-strong Studio Anyo, says: 'We all shared a large communal desk in the middle of the office at my first practice. I learned so much by overhearing conversations and being asked for my opinion on others' work. You don't know what you don't know until you hear it, so I worry about the development of junior architects cut off from the office environment.'

It is abundantly clear that there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to whether a practice should or should not return to the office. The way we do business has changed forever but it is for each practice to assess what works best. Are you a mature practice where tutoring is less important? Or a start-up that can adapt easily to remote working, but needs space to collaborate?

If you do return to the office, how do you make it safe for your staff? Some practices have leased bigger offices, making social distancing easier. Others have remained in their offices and installed perspex partitions to make spaces safe. Some have opted for a middle ground and allowed staff to work from home while providing a central space for collaboration, in part as an antidote to 'cabin fever'.

I am loath to sit on the fence on any issue but I do believe that, for most, a hybrid solution is the best way to enjoy the efficiencies of remote working, while still providing spaces for creative collaboration (arguably the 'secret sauce' of good architecture). It is also vital that we allow young architects to benefit from osmotic learning by being part of an office environment.

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