HABITAT MATTER
E-Chat Series Recap

The Future of Workplace Design

Discussion Series
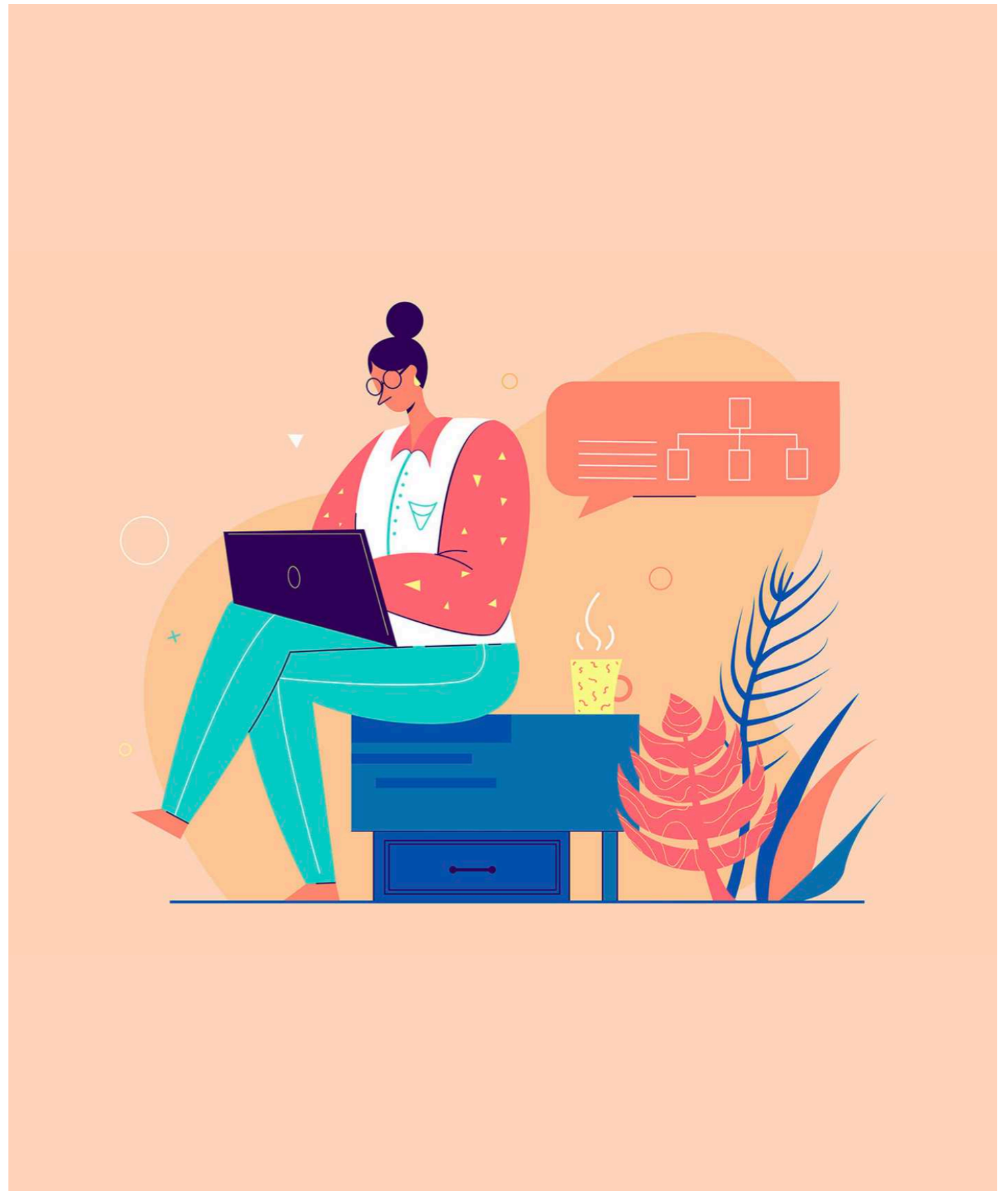
with our design community

01

The Workplace Upside-Down

"Working in bed sounds quite nice at first, but it gets old really fast."

01

The Workplace Upside-Down

How do we design together, apart?

- Re-evaluate the concept of a home office

- Home office challenges: space & focus

- Concentration & productivity vs. creativity & innovative thinking

- Tools for designing and technology for connecting

When coronavirus swept across the world, it took us all by surprise. Being based in New York and Boston, we were in some of the first places in the US to be locked down, in early March 2020.

We were, like our peers, disoriented, confused, and anxious for what would happen over the next few months. Conferences meetings, fairs, lunches, appointments — everything — were all canceled within the span first two weeks.

In the beginning we all needed time to adjust. Within a few weeks we started the process of looking at the world with fresh eyes, and the Habitat E-Chat series was born.

We organized a series of video discussions with our design community about how things are changing in the field of workplace and commercial interior design, and what the future will hold for our industry and our clients.

In this first conversation, we explore topics related to the rapid adaptation of companies around the US, with new policies of having nearly the entire workforce remote (at least anyone who was not laid off or furloughed).

If that is not stressful enough, the people who could work from home now had to do so with no preparation, and with children and spouses home all day, sharing the same space 24/7.
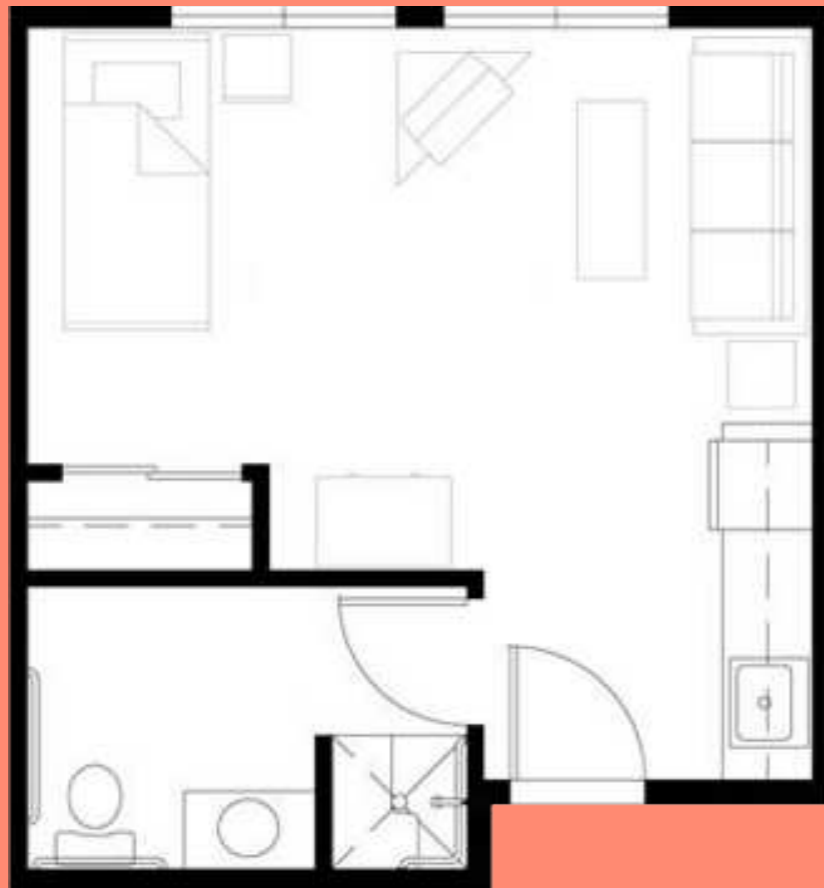
Here are some of the things we learned:

For many people, the concept of a "home office" is not possible or realistic. For two people in a small city apartment, both

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The Workplace Upside-Down

Where is the space to work at home?

constantly on video calls, there is no space to work. Working in bed sounds quite nice at first, but gets old really fast. While some people might do well working from home, many people would have to move out of cities in order for it to really work. We see now that many people who could afford to move out of cities temporarily, did so.

Paradoxically, two people in a confined space seems very cramped, but many of us can't wait to get back to the office or even out to a coffee shop for change of scenery. One person talking in close proximity is a major distraction, but many people talking and clicking becomes background noise.

The social pressure of simply being around people helps us be productive, even if they're peers and not really paying much attention to us.

For families with young kids at home all day, with both parents working, it is too distracting to get very much work done. This isn't a normal "work from home" situation, it's just something we have to adapt to temporarily until they can go back to school.

It helps when employers can be flexible with time. Of course for collaboration we have to be available during normal hours to work with colleagues, but while outside the office, we can recognize that some people are more productive at different times of the day or night.

This is also an opportunity for us to see our co-workers as more than just that - they're people too. Being apart may be bringing us closer in unexpected ways - whether by a glimpse of their home through zoom, or hearing about their children, dogs, or partners for the first time.

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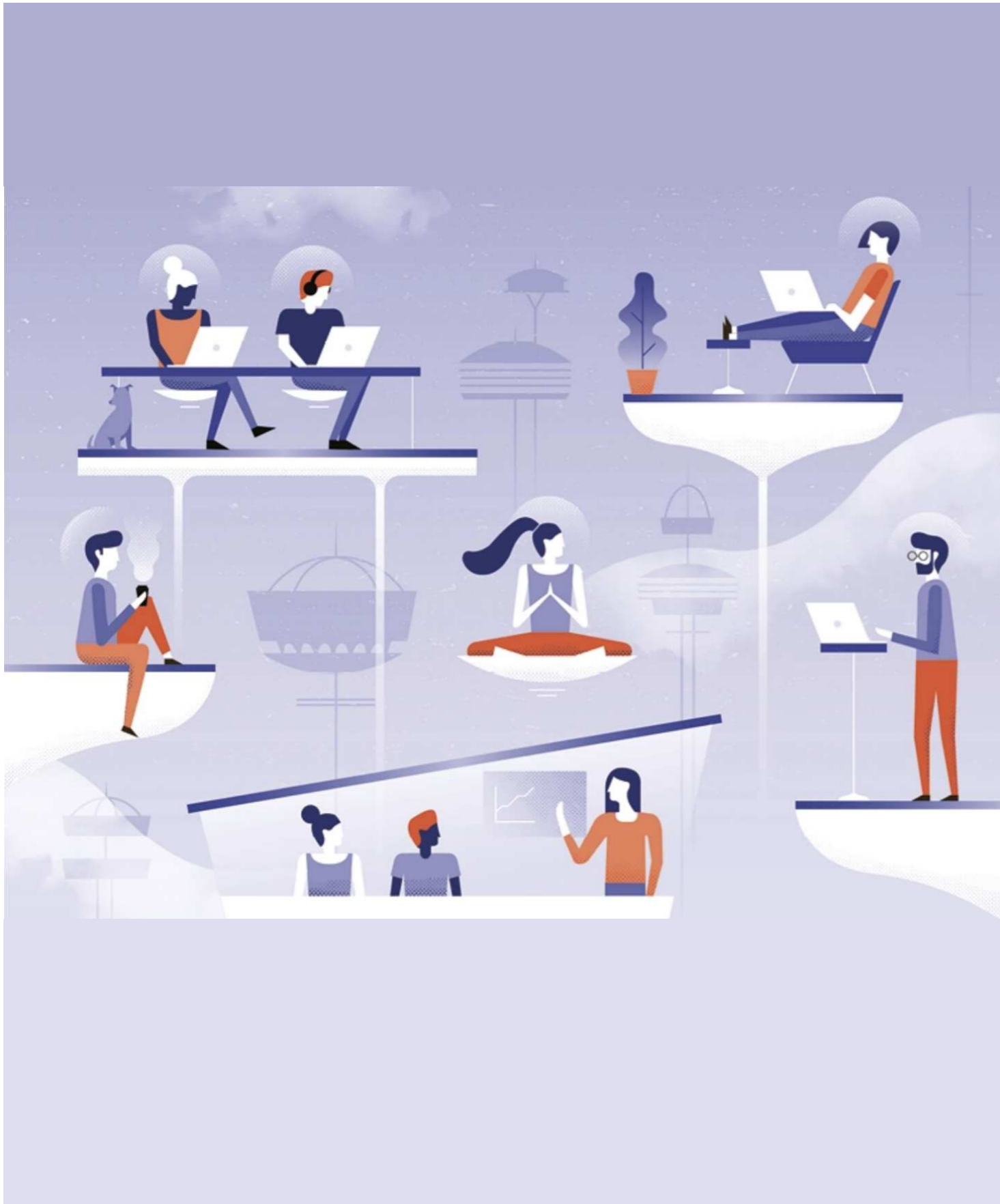
The Workplace in the new world

"Change will not come through building codes, but by best practices of architects"

02

The Workplace in the new world

A blank page for new beginnings

- Adapting the built environment to control epidemic spread

- Is this the end of the open plan office? Return to the cube?

- Rethinking proximity & density, balanced with real estate costs

- Fluid Workplace: new standards of freedom & flexibility

- Hoteling: reckless germ spreader, or essential density reducer?

In designing new offices to reduce the spread of germs, we might start to see some radical experiments in office layout: People could be separated into team clusters in different sections or wings that don't have physical contact. Meetings could be taken through glass, like jail visits. Offices could be designed so people can't be within 6 feet of each other. Workplaces could be smaller, located more closely to people's homes.

Some architects will bring these extreme ideas to life, but by the time they are built, we hope that the worst of this pandemic will have passed. The best outcome for new designs will be to reduce the spread of all germs, including seasonal flu.

Change will not necessarily come through building codes, but by best practices of architects, designers, and facility managers. It's critical that we share the insights that we find with each other, freely & openly.

Is this the end of the open plan office as we know it?

Don't expect everyone to get private offices, but more key executives will certainly use their influence to get their own.

Bottom line: Open offices are still economical — expect to see an explosion of flexible office dividers that can be easily moved and reconfigured with changing density requirements. These partitions will be cheaper than giving each person more square footage.

The Fluid Workplace

Working in shifts so we can get back to work earlier sounds like a good idea in theory, but we predict that this will create a new rift in office culture.

Executives, collaborative teams, and young people will get priority in returning to the office.

02

The Workplace in the new world

A blank page for new beginnings

- **Adapting the built environment to control epidemic spread**

- **Is this the end of the open plan office? Return to the cube?**

- **Rethinking proximity & density, balanced with real estate costs**

- **Fluid Workplace: new standards of freedom & flexibility**

- **Hoteling: reckless germ spreader, or essential density reducer?**

Being there will become a sort of status symbol, and the intangible benefits of being in person will drive a wedge between people in the office and those at home.

This is especially unfortunate for older generations and at-risk populations, who might decide that it's worth it for their career to take the risk and go in, even at the cost of their own health.

Honestly unlimited sick days are needed. People can't go to work sick to save up PTO. With "Unlimited PTO", it sounds like a nice benefit in theory, but every ask for time off is a negotiation, rather than a given. Each request has to be justified to the boss. In this pandemic, for someone to feel the pressure to go into the office even if they don't feel 100% well risks the health of everyone.

Hoteling is Dead, Long Live Hoteling!

The concept that workers can mostly work remotely, only go in to the office when they want or need to, and choose a different desk each time they arrive was hailed as the ideal modality for modern offices.

Innovative companies willing to try hoteling could save a lot of money on real estate costs, and invest those savings into building a better facility with more technology. In the light of COVID-19 though, the idea of sharing desks has all of a sudden become scary and risky.

Between these opposing forces, the economics of hoteling will still win, and some of those real estate savings will go toward much more frequent and in-depth cleaning services.

While expensive cleaning crews will be more common, simple remedies are still best: Clorox wipes, ubiquitous Purel dispensers, frequent hand washing, and reduced touch points. The winning solutions in new offices will be low-cost and practical.

03

Rethinking surfaces & materials

"We will see a trend back to smooth, hard, shiny surfaces"

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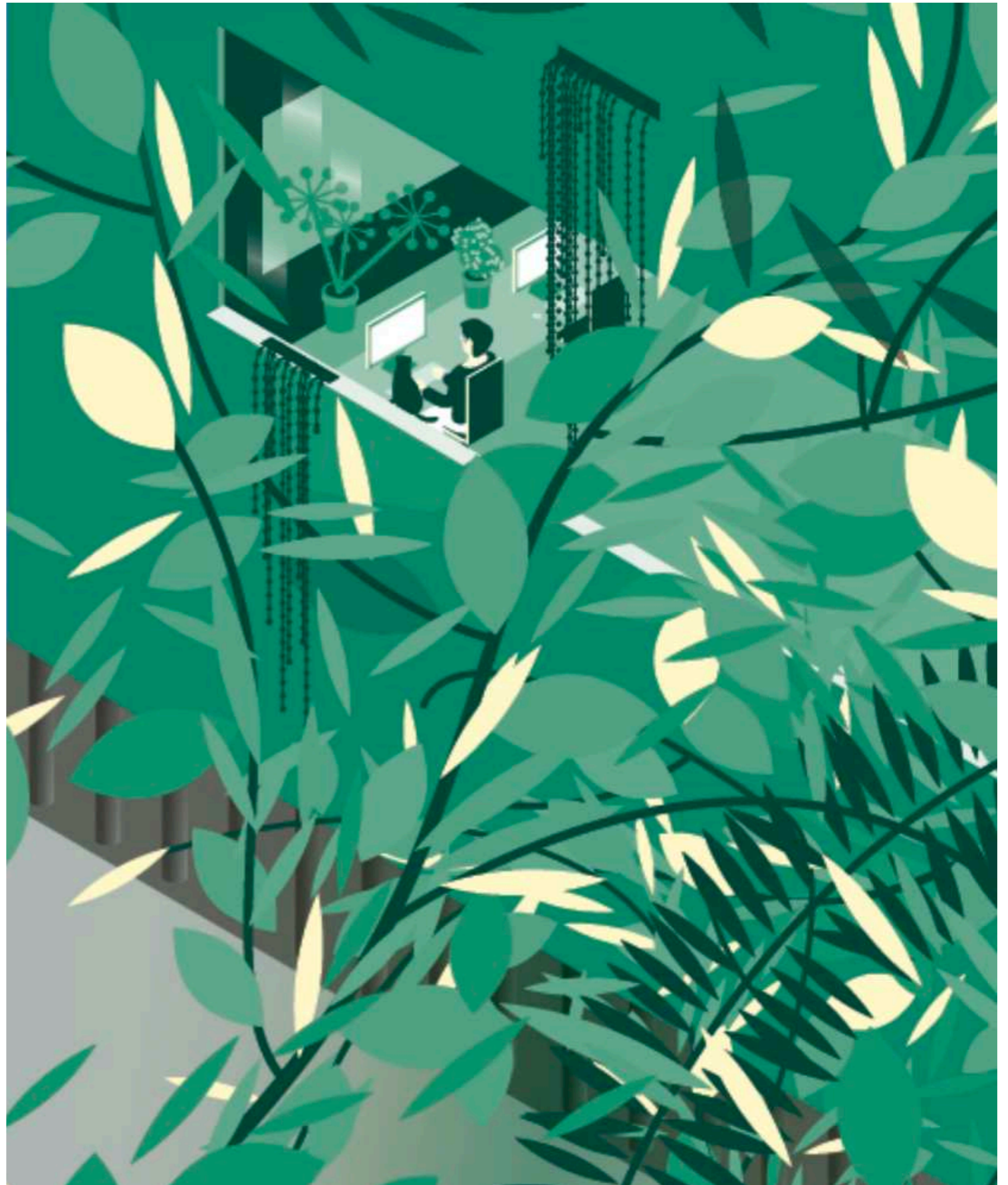
Rethinking surfaces & materials

Transitioning from tactile to tactical

- What materials are associated to germs?

- Rethinking luxurious textiles

- Bio-safe, antimicrobial products

- Healthcare design merges with the workplace

- How are foreign products affected vs local ones?

All sorts of building materials and finishes for interior design will evolve over the next few years as people are thinking of ways to increase the hygiene of our spaces and slow the spread of pathogens like COVID-19.

In recent years we have seen plush luxurious fabrics and deeply textured materials take center stage in interior design, and that trend might be shifting.

Fabric manufacturers will push for "healthy" textiles. Luxurious upholstery is too porous, and hospital textiles are not known for comfort or aesthetics. We'll see the division between these two categories start to fade.

Perhaps we will see a trend back to smooth, hard, shiny finishes that are non-absorbent and very easy to clean. Think glass, polished metal, smooth stone, laminates, plastics, corian, etc.

Maintenance is important. All these materials must be easily cleanable, ideally with bleach.

Instead of the cold clinical feeling that these hard surfaces might evoke, designers will have a challenge of using hygienic surfaces while maintaining a warm welcoming atmosphere.

"How do we make individual seating from hard plastic as comfortable as a sofa?"

Healthcare design has always been slow to change, but if some of these design innovations are done in hospitality or office buildings with the correct materials, then our hospitals can also benefit from new designs without taking much risk.

Almost anything that can be no-touch probably will be. But it won't be in the budget of most companies to have automated motorized doors on every single room.

We will see antimicrobial coatings on some high-touch items like door handles, but mostly we'll rely on cleaning regimens of increased intensity.

04

Adaptation & Repurposing space

"There is no time or budget now to rebuild from scratch"

04

Adaptation & Repurposing space

Everything must change!
(within reason & within budget)

- Temporary solutions for returning to work

- Safety in numbers: how do we manage density and maintain our humanity?

- Rebuilding the workplaces we have

While we can fantasize about what the future of the workplace will look like, there is no time or budget now to rebuild from scratch. We need to work with what we have, to get people safely to work and kick the economy back into gear.

There are many tactics that can be used in existing offices, to manage a smooth transition and ramp up to full capacity.

Establish a density plan in order to keep seats 6 feet apart. Reorient workstations so that individuals don't directly face each other. Place monitors & chairs of unoccupied desks in storage, to reduce surfaces to clean, and remove any confusion about where to sit.

If your design system doesn't have any dividers, consider adding separation panels or shields between working stations for additional protection.

Transition to unassigned seats, as different people may be going to the office on different days. With the appropriate density already established, we allow employees to choose their own seat. When seats are not assigned there is less clutter and desks can be thoroughly cleaned every night.

Assign lockers, file drawers or storage cabinets for anyone keeping personal items at the office.

Based on current knowledge of the virus, a possible environmental solution is to increase heat and humidity levels within the office.

As a more advanced and expensive tactic, make upgrades to the building's HVAC system, for better air filtration and add UV light filters to kill the virus in recirculated air.

What happens to the collaboration areas?

Assign a maximum capacity for each conference room, again based on the 6-foot rule, and

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remove excess chairs. Smaller meeting rooms that don't have space for multiple people can be used as a storage space for unused furniture, or as solo offices for key people.

At reception areas, and for client-facing desks, we'll have to install temporary "sneeze guards", so that we can have face to face meetings without masks. With masks on, we miss a lot of subtle visual cues in the conversation.

If possible, apply nano coatings (anti-microbial, anti-viral and anti-fungal liquids) to any surface to reduce contamination. Although they don't last forever, it could be a potential solution for the highest-touch surfaces such as elevator buttons.

Rebuilding the workplaces we have

When we return to our offices after the quarantine period is over, good design will be the key to ending this unsustainable social isolation. With the right strategies in place, we can resume normal interactions.

Corridors will be widened, more partitions added between departments, and fewer shared facilities. Spaces will become a lot more flexible and adaptable by default, and this will have a deep impact on all aspects of the industry.

Some (high budget) renovations might incorporate materials that are inherently antimicrobial (like silver, copper and their alloys), reducing the need for topical coatings and toxic chemicals.

There will also be an exponential increase the automation of all workplace elements: lighting systems, faucets, toilets, smart window shades, elevator buttons, doors, and more. With this proliferation, we'll quickly see the costs come down to a point where touchless becomes the new standard everywhere and most companies can afford to retrofit.

05

Designing elements for the new world

"Any object or surface we touch must now be designed with more questions in mind"

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Designing elements for the new world

To touch or not to touch?

- **Managing the fear of touching things**

- **The economics of touchless sensors**

- **Designing solutions, not just objects**

A new dimension has entered the world of product design. Now some requirements that had only been the domain of medical and sanitary facilities, are necessary for all design elements that we interact with.

Any object or surface we touch now must be designed with more questions in mind: Do we need to touch it at all? Is it easily cleanable? Can it be made with an antimicrobial finish?

Automatic doors are the most common and most highly visible example. High traffic doors such as those in hotel entrances have been automated for a long time, with most people thinking that it is just a nice convenience. Now the general public will recognize the true function of these doors, beyond saving some physical exertion.

Will automatic doors become the standard even required by code for all rooms accessed by multiple people? These are not luxury solutions anymore but essential requirements. The cost of creating hands-free solutions enabled by technology is minimal compared to the price of having to shut down an entire office or business due to contamination or illness.

Sensors are available not only for doors but for cabinets and drawers, faucets, and lights. One of the highest frequency touch points is elevator buttons. In that case, some companies are hiring a single person to touch the buttons. In this case, a human solution will work better than a current technology solution.

For more complex interactions, futuristic voice controls might finally be viable.

Not everything will have to change though. Surfaces that we don't touch will remain mostly the same. People will still carry their personal objects, and new standards of cleaning will allow us to keep using the things we love.
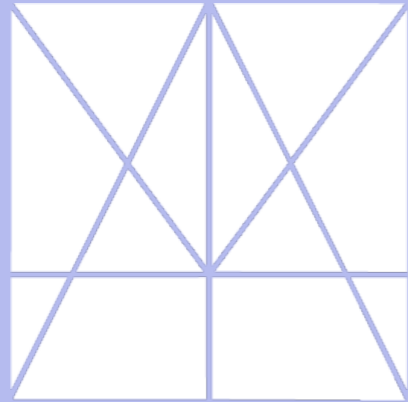
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