



Design leadership for the future of work

Leading academics, designers, industry leaders and practitioners explore and discuss the crucial role of designers in achieving more equitable and sustainable ways of working.

Message from Professor Laurene Vaughan RMIT University

Events in the past years have accelerated, intensified, and laid bare the structural inequalities that preceded in Europe and internationally.

Within working environments, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption, changing workplaces within organisations as well as the relationships between organisations and their partners, users and clients.

This has required strong adaptability and flexibility from those fortunate enough to retain jobs and work from home, while placing strains on those in frontline roles, have caring responsibilities or live in sub-optimal housing conditions.

For individuals who have moved online, communication requires new forms of digital and emotional literacy and makes it more difficult to assess when communication is not working or when people are, in the worst-case scenario, at risk.

Despite the challenges, post-COVID life offers an opportunity to rethink work – how we want to work and why.

In this context, designers may be uniquely positioned to rebuild and restructure working environments that are ethical, caring and effective, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Architects, interior designers, design entrepreneurs, service design experts or communication professionals, can all have a crucial role in how we experience work.



Professor Laurene Vaughan
Dean, School of Design
RMIT University



RMIT Practice Research Symposium (PRS)

RMIT's Practice Research Symposium (PRS) is a biannual meeting bringing together supervisors, observers and practitioners engaged in a practice-based PhD program in the areas of design and creative arts.

The RMIT PhD program was originally developed by RMIT's School of Architecture and Design and has been taught in Australia for more than three decades.

At the PRS, RMIT invites candidates to reflect upon the nature of their creative practice with a critical, reflective framework to articulate the contribution it offers to their discipline and community of practice.

Through this community, RMIT offers a set of solutions and probable futures not only about design but also about how we understand the emerging landscape.

To learn more about RMIT's doctoral program, which is recognised worldwide for its impact and innovative approach, visit: practice-research.com

Rethinking work towards greater equality and sustainability

“Designers can create and lead transformations towards more equitable and sustainable working environments, cultures, relationships, and processes”

The need for structural change

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 81% of the global workforce (which comprises 2.7 billion people) was affected by workplace closures due to lock downs, ‘stay at home’ orders and similar measures as of early April 2020.

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected workers in low paid service industries, such as care and transport services, as well as food production – roles that in many countries are predominantly undertaken by migrant workers.

Reports from charities, NGOs and think tanks point to the urgent need for structural and cultural change in the work sphere.

They suggest solutions that can be implemented at multiple levels including safer, more sustainable working environments through to healthier workplace cultures, stronger legal protection for workers, more equitable pay, benefits, and greater access to good jobs for all.

Reshaping the landscape of work

Post-COVID life offers an opportunity to rethink work towards greater equality and sustainability.

In this context, designers may be uniquely positioned to rebuild and restructure working environments that are ethical, caring and effective.

Designers can create lasting positive change with their transformational abilities to synthesize the often-conflicting demands of multiple stakeholders, using methods that promote power-sharing and decision-making.

Through these skills, designers can invert the old environments, systems, cultures, processes, and relationships that previously bound inequality into the everyday experience of work.



Professor Sarah Teasley
School of Design
RMIT University



Considering the office space in a post pandemic world

“The workspace has transitioned from a mono-purpose ‘get-things-done’ place towards a multifunctional, flexible hub for meaningful interactions”

The new work paradigm

The global pandemic has accelerated pre-existing trends in the work sphere related to health and wellbeing, sustainability and digital transformation.

Technological improvements in the era of COVID-19 have been extraordinary. As an example, Microsoft reported that they had seen two years' worth of digital transformation in just two months.

Remote working is now a reality. We are rapidly moving from physical to virtual and hybrid modes of working, and many countries around the world are implementing 'right to work from home' policies.

This situation is having a tremendous impact on the office space concept, leading to rapid transformation and optimisation.

New challenges and business models

The new work paradigm has posed new challenges for property companies, including: lower rents; lower demand for large office spaces; high investment needs for health and safety, as well as digital readiness to respond to a broader range of tenant demands.

The relationship between the landlord and the tenant has also been affected. We are transitioning from the silo model to an ecosystem model, where the customer is at the centre and all parts of the journey are viewed singularly.

Property companies can see these challenges as an opportunity to build more resilient operating models that help organisations to anticipate and respond to the changing nature of their business and ensure their continuity.

Why do we need to go to the office?

To rethink the new office space concept, organisations must reflect on why their employees need go to the office.

Workers are increasingly identifying the office as a space for socialisation and collaborative work rather than for conducting individual tasks that can be easily done from home.

The office is becoming a multi-purpose, collaborative and co-creation space, attractor of workers, collaborators, and clients. For this reason, open and adaptable spaces that encourage agile ways of working are needed more than ever.



Dr Susana Saiz
Director, **Arup Spain**



Reflecting on working cultures, ethical relations and place

“Place and practice are crucially related”

Cultures of work

There are slippery questions, even ambiguities, around our understanding of relationships between work and culture.

Individual responses and responsibilities are important. The focus here is on ‘working culturally’ and how this relates to questions of ‘structural justice’ and of ‘community’.

Part of the implication here is the relationality of place and plurality, and how narratives and metaphors of equality are not reproduced at the expense of ethical relationality and emplaced equity.

Working with culture

Place and practice are crucially related. My own preference is to think of ontological re-turns, and the relationality of people, place and practice – and cultural counteractions to the extreme objectification, individualisation and alienation.

One order of cultural counteraction is systemic change. For example, over structural inequities in relation to issues of racism, gender, and class. But policy and language as rhetoric and metaphor effects little change.

Equality and/or inclusion frequently do not translate as equity or ethical relations because there is a political economy at stake.

Ethical relationships

What then is our understanding of work? Is our work more than a job? And what does that look like in terms of equity and ethical relations?

These are issues to think about during the pandemic. One thing I have done is reclaim and reconstitute some community land on my native island, 16,000 km away from my work in Melbourne.

With this, I am beginning a new project on the future of my work, of work as a social practice. The privilege of buying that land is not one of commodity or ownership but of removing it from the market and returning it to the commons, socially and (hopefully) legally.

Land is life, a space for working openly with people and place to reconfigure our material relationships and understanding of ‘the commons’ for structural justice – and working culturally, beyond metaphors – for environmental safety and plural social futures.



Dr James Oliver

Associate Professor, School of Design
RMIT University



Building student resilience: designers for the future

“By the year 2050, the students we teach today will inevitably be leading the achievement towards climate goals”

The challenges of future design leaders

Design education still places a strong emphasis on the technical skills needed to prepare design students for the rigours of their practice.

However, we underestimate the immense adversity that the current generation of design students are going to face due to the effects of climate change as well as socially-related aspects of systemic sexism, racism and poverty.

Our students will also be confronted by the unique nature of designing itself. Designing can be seen as a practice where problems and solutions co-evolve, where there is not one clear solution and where fixation is not possible.

Why student resilience is important

Literature indicates that one in three students in a higher education setting will suffer from levels of anxiety and depression that are clinical.

To cope with the current mental crisis, design educators need to ask themselves: What challenges are young people facing in higher education? How could we be stronger in delivering better outcomes? What will be the challenges that designers face in the near future?

In the design field, resilience can help students to shape their practice, where they will not only be challenged by the ecosystem that they are trying to change, but also by their own design processes.

Building resilience is also important to prepare students for setbacks in their lives, adversity and, in more serious situations, traumas and crises.

Designer resilience for the future

In psychology, if you have fixed beliefs, you will have lower resilience and therefore you will be less likely to reframe challenges as a possibility to grow.

Fixation in design short circuits the creative process and it stalls value creation.

Resilience could be a way to help future design practitioners to overcome challenging design processes where their problem and solution framing co-evolve successfully.

Being a resilient designer also means reframing the feedback received as well as your relationship to the problem.



Dr Rebecca Price

Assistant Professor of Transition Design
TU Delft



Shaping future workforces through inclusive design

“We need to build sustainable, healthy design practices to support our own wellbeing”

A human-centred design perspective

The expansion of human-centred design has led to a reconfiguration of the design practice in a more inclusive way that considers care for others as well as care for ourselves, as designers.

As design leadership adapts to these conditions, we are developing alternative leadership models to appropriately lead design teams and projects.

These new models can influence leadership beyond the domains of design and help shape our existing and future workforces.

Care for the workforce

An example of design practice in line with the concept of care for the workforce is *The Workers Tarot Deck* by Lara Penin.

In her work, Penin features the contemporary ‘gig’ worker on a deck of tarot cards. For example, the Uber driver, food deliverer, Airbnb cleaner, among many other variations – all of which our economies are now dependent on at the same time.

The deck is used as a critical tool to help designers understand the impact that their designs – services, platforms, products, systems – have on workers.

The exercise proposes zooming out into the larger ethical and political implications of service design to help practitioners define a more consequential practice for themselves.

The tool not only presents the problem of the designer’s role in building new workforces, but also provides some research into how this might be dealt with by the designer.

Care for ourselves

The need for self-care in design is crucial, particularly in these spaces which are contained areas of trauma and complex relationships.

Trauma responsive design practice is a growing area of research in postgraduate design degrees.

How do we prepare ourselves for dealing with complex and difficult situations in a way to bring ourselves up to the type of conditions that the first responder might be prepared for?

We are alert to the need to ensure we do not damage people in vulnerable communities and, therefore, work ethically.

We should also build sustainable, healthy design practices to maintain our standards through our own wellbeing.



Dr Marius Foley

Program Manager MA Design Futures
RMIT University



Engineering fluid ways of working for the future

“The pandemic has led to more generosity, more people willing to contribute in a truly humble way”

Blurring the binaries

The pandemic has allowed us to break the boundaries between the online and the onsite worlds of work.

It has helped balance the idea of place and situated knowledge on the one hand, and the idea of accessing full resources, personnel and data, on the other.

Throughout the years, we had to choose between one or the other, losing the richness of combining both methods and creating hybrid working environments.

The past 1.5 years have highlighted essential areas of improvement, bringing new opportunities.

Post-pandemic potential

The ancient Greeks had two gods for distinguishing the experiences of time: Kronos and Kairos.

Kronos exemplified the linear and chronological sense of time. It was deterministic and could be quantified and measured. By contrast, Kairos was fluid and represented the most qualitative and creative sense of time. It couldn't be controlled nor possessed.

The pandemic has promoted Kairos' understanding of time and our ability to fluently interact with all stakeholders involved.

The post-pandemic potential also includes the possibility of having bigger audiences. We have increased interactions with people in projects, while improving hierarchical quality and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Another positive impact has been the creation of faster and more agile ways of working, which has been accelerated through digital transformation.

We have also experienced that the pandemic has led to more generosity, more people willing to contribute in a truly humble way.

Critical thinking and online interaction

New technologies have been produced, developed, and implemented by companies and, ultimately, by people. For this reason, it is essential to reclaim our digital sovereignty and adopt critical thinking when using digital technologies.

A more natural online interaction is also needed. We should aim to keep using our natural gestures and behaviours to make the most of these interactions.

When this is achieved, people feel more comfortable and the barriers between online and offline become less obvious.



Dr Albert Fuster Martí
Academic Director
ELISAVA



Looking forward

Message from Professor Marta Fernandez RMIT Europe

“In the last years we have seen our houses become offices, schools and play spaces”

Digital transformation across industries and sectors has accelerated and many businesses have done in five months what would have taken five years in terms of technology, working practices, or flexible working. Health and wellbeing also need to be front and centre of every organisation's transformation agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic has hopefully made us more conscious about how our future ways of working can drive economic recovery whilst maintaining health and wellbeing for all.

At RMIT Europe, we focus on strengthening joint efforts on sustainable and inclusive urban developments and bringing knowledge into actions on topics such as energy positive buildings, integration of nature in cities, active mobility, as well as our contribution to the Built4People partnership, which places citizens at the heart of the low carbon transition in buildings and districts.

We support the European Commission Research and Innovation agenda based on our involvement in the European Construction Technology Platform (ECTP) where we lead a committee focused on inclusive and health conducive built environment design.



Professor Marta Fernandez

Executive Director

RMIT Europe

Chair of Build for Life Committee

European Construction Technology Platform

About this publication

This publication is an outcome of the global webinar 'Design leadership for the future of work' hosted by RMIT Europe in 2021.

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About RMIT Europe

RMIT's European hub in Barcelona, Spain, is the gateway for European research, industry, government and enterprise to innovation and talent in Australia and Asia.

We leverage the University global connections to deliver an international dimension to research and innovation beyond Europe's borders.

We provide early access to the next generation of talent for European industry including servicing our partners seeking local talent for their operations in Australia.

To learn more about RMIT Europe, visit rmit.eu or contact europe@rmit.edu.au