

ALONE, TOGETHER



A slew of organisations both locally and internationally are rethinking the dynamics of the modern workspace, to allow not only for the sharing of space, but of ideas.

text Genty Marshall
photography Scottie Cameron

Our workplaces are changing. Driven by substantial social, environmental and financial shifts, the idea of the typical office environment is now about as outdated as the notion of a typical family. As the new generation's values of transparency, sharing and collaboration determine how our workspaces are designed and function, old priorities of security and corporate secrecy are being laid to rest, along with the gold watch for long service.

The casualisation of the workforce has seen many people shift out of the traditional work environment and take on a more nomadic approach to where work is done. In Australia, there are nearly one million people operating a business from home. If you take Victoria as a snapshot, 96 percent of businesses would be classed as small businesses and, of these, 62 percent are home-based.

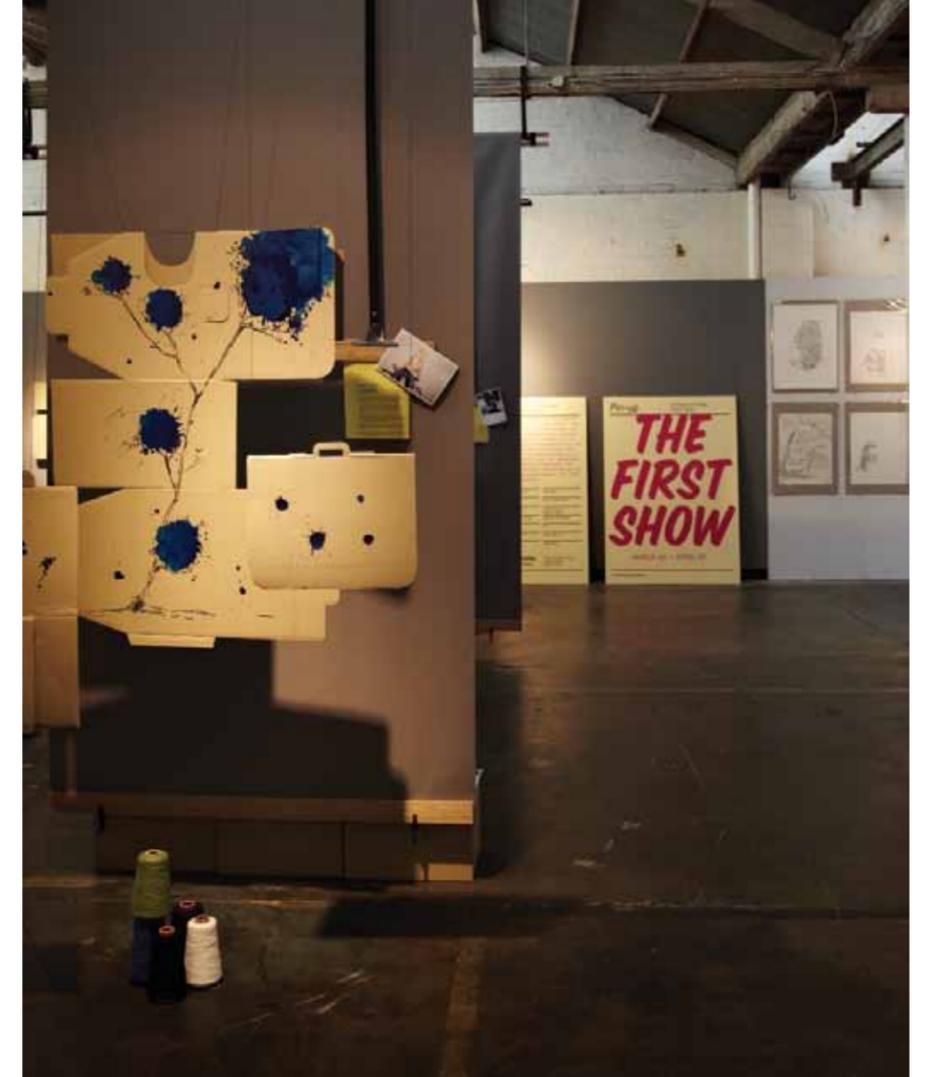
Although for baby boomers and the older gen Xers, this move to self-employment was not always voluntary. Flexibility, lower overheads, privacy and security have made the home office an attractive option. Late 1980s and early 1990s technology offered the promise of independence in a virtual workspace.

Entrepreneurs of gen Y and the new digital natives are different beasts entirely. Sure, the desire for flexibility is still there, as is that for independence, but there is a deeper understanding of the difference between being connected virtually and being connected in a physical space. As the first users of online social networks, we are all developers of new ways of relating to one another.

For this new generation, the home-based businesses are becoming more of a transition, rather than an endpoint. While starting out opting for the home office for financial reasons, this very social generation finds that the search for professional autonomy quickly spirals into a battle against isolation and a motivational struggle.

Australian social researcher, Hugh Mackay, describes this need to physically connect: "We thrive on social interaction and feel the loss of it when all we have is the screen-based alternative, no matter how well we adapt to the technology... When our working environment is dominated by non-personal activity – being locked onto a screen, for instance – the need for personal relief is correspondingly acute."

Enter the share houses of the workplace. Co-working ventures have been springing up across the globe for the last 10 years and are becoming increasingly popular. Groups of friends, who started out wanting to simply rent a space together, have, over time, developed organised business models, such as the Centre for Social Innovation in Toronto and the global Hub spaces – the most recent of which opened in February in Melbourne.



The Compound Interest facility also includes its own exhibition space, Pin-Up.

A prime example of the success of these new spaces can be seen in The Compound Interest. As a collection of small businesses all in complementary fields, The Compound Interest represents the balance between autonomy and collaboration that not only freelancers, but also companies large and small, seem to be striving for at the moment. Jeremy Wortsman is one of the founders of The Compound Interest and a director of the Jacky Winter Group and gallery, Lamington Drive.

"I started my business from home and that was terrible. It was very isolating. I'm incredibly introverted, but at the same time I need people around, during the day especially. It's a common thing with freelancers or anyone doing their own work. Some people work best that way, but I didn't find it to be the case."

Since its relocation to Collingwood with co-founders, Stuart Geddes of Chase & Galley and John McLennan of The Golden Grouse, The Compound Interest has grown to cover almost every design-related field, as well as two gallery spaces and a casual workshop area that provide a big part of the social outlet.

"Part of the design here was being able to have breakout spaces," says Wortsman. "It's great having a space where everyone can come together



The Compound Interest aims to strike a balance between communal and private office space for its various tenants.



Shared dining area.

and get involved with the building and with their networks – where there can be that kind of interaction. It’s really hard though, because a lot of people are cocooned in their own spaces and, even though it is a big communal area, getting people to mingle is a bit harder. When we were upstairs [in Fitzroy] all in the same room, it was a lot easier. Here we’re still striking that balance.”

And it is this word – balance – that is the value of first priority for this generation. The search for balance is what is defining us. Balance between commitment and freedom, financial success and creative expression, frugality and consumerism, old and new, public and private. This priority is shaping our spaces, our communications, the way we do business and how we relate to one another in every way.

In this changing social climate, if large businesses are to stay competitive, they may have to compete on a very different level to attract the brightest young talents, who are not interested in the old manners of hierarchical management or willing to sacrifice their desire for a satisfying life for career advancement.

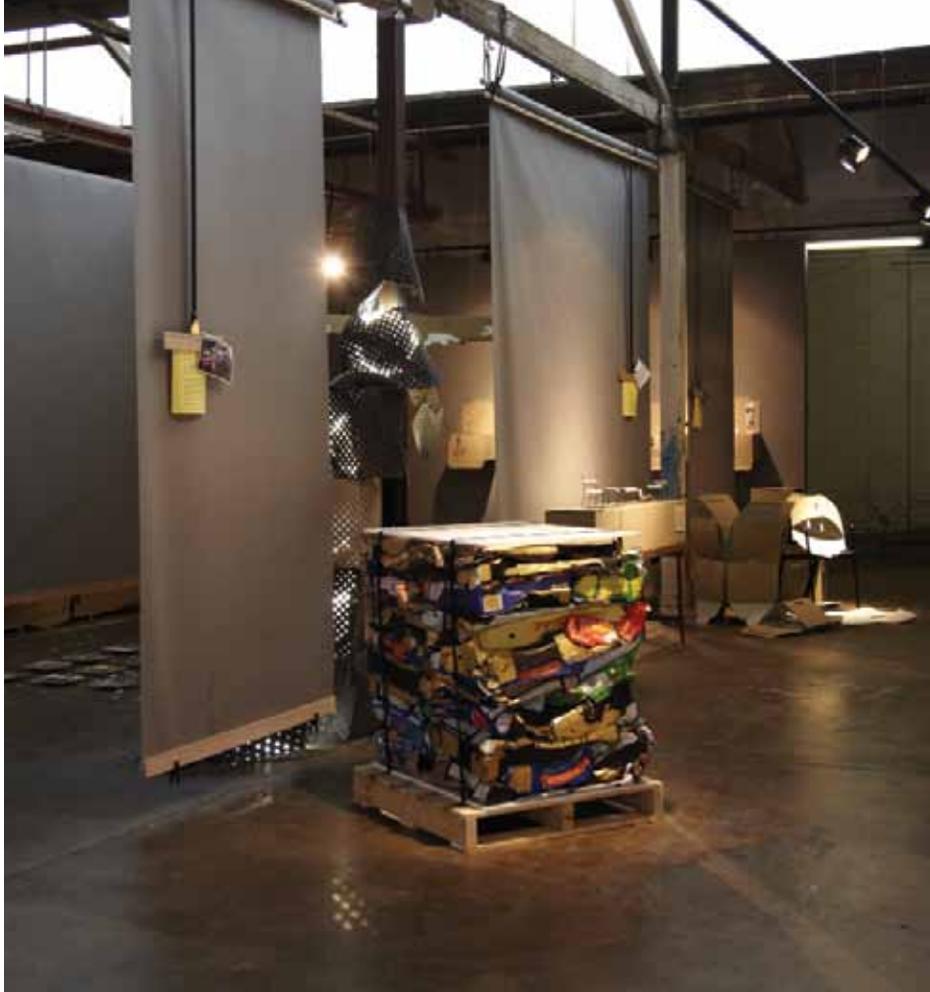
Luc Kamperman is the managing partner Australia/New Zealand for Veldhoen and Co, which, since 1994, has helped organisations around the world to develop and implement new work styles. It was Veldhoen that introduced the concept of ‘activity-based working’, incorporated in the award-winning Shelley Street project for the Macquarie Bank in Sydney.

“New technology enables us to work anywhere, anytime. This has a big impact on leadership style. With people working anywhere and anytime, leaders need to show trust in employees and be capable of managing them on output. People are capable of managing their own contribution and accounting for themselves. We need to change from checking up on people towards checking in with people.”

At Macquarie, Veldhoen designed 65 percent of the work settings for individual work and 35 percent for collaborative work, and Kamperman predicts that in 10 years’ time this will be the other way around. Either way, the challenge for the designers of tomorrow’s workplaces will be in finding that balance.

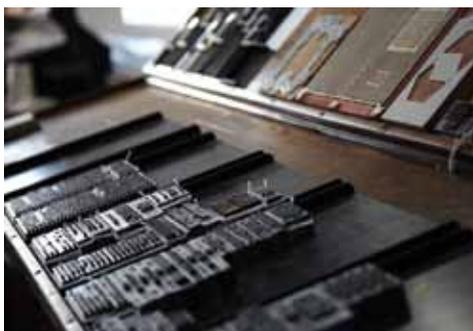
For the time being, it’s ridiculous to think that plonking a square business in an open plan hole is going to result in effortless communication and collaboration. Without addressing the business structure and behaviour, all workers will get is paranoia and some awkward forced interactions.

But, as work styles change with the times, we must find new ways to unite and divide ourselves and our spaces as we become more autonomous yet collective – striking that balance as we all search for how to be alone, together. *(inside)*



Snapshot of the Pin-Up exhibition space’s first show.

The *Alone, Together* seminar and exhibition will be presented by design analyst and trend forecaster, Genty Marshall, at Decoration + Design, Melbourne, 21–24 July 2011.



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