



Drivers of Change for the Future of Work

January 17, 2022

HermanMiller

“This big wicked problem, the future of work, has no answer and really no end.”

Jennifer Kolstad

Global Design Director, Ford Motor Company

An intrinsic characteristic of wicked problems is that they can never be solved and we will never stop working on them, but through thoughtful design and collaboration, we can make progress. **With that spirit of optimism, the panelists of Herman Miller Design Essentials sessions on the Future of Work identified drivers of change.** These broad-ranging conversations with experts in technology, architecture, design, neuroscience, innovation and more took place over three virtual gatherings, each focused on a different aspect of the work experience: People, Process, and Place.

Panelists of Design Essentials Sessions on the Future of Work

Verda Alexander

Co-Founder, Studio O+A

Jennifer Kolstad

Global Design Director, Ford Motor Company

Kimberly Dowdell AIA, NOMA, LEED AP

Principal, HOK Chicago

Past President of NOMA

Shilpi Kumar

Founder, Khoj Lab

Haley Nelson

Senior Interior Designer, HGA Architects & Engineers

Ann Noe

Senior Program Manager, Inclusiveness & Diversity, MillerKnoll

Gretta M. Peterson NCIDQ, IIDA, EDAC, LEED AP

Senior Manager, Global Workplace Strategy & Development, MillerKnoll

Dr. Dan Radecki

Co-Founder and Chief Scientific Officer, Academy for Brain Based Leadership

Executive Director Of Neuroscience, AbbVie

Ali Rayl

Vice President of Product, Slack

Don Ricker

Director of Strategy, Gensler

MODERATOR

Joseph White

Director of Design Strategy, MillerKnoll

When we asked our panelists what feelings they’ve noticed in their day-to-day experience, many said they felt hope for the future. **They had faith that collectively we can make the future of work better.** But they also expressed anxiety that collectively we won’t learn from our shared experiences of the last two years.

This mirrors how most people are feeling at this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic—what psychologists are calling “pandemic flux.”¹ It’s feeling mixed and changing emotions about the future, the past, and how to move forward. Some of the anxiety about the future stems from the fact that our world has become less certain and more complex, and things that were once binary (e.g. working from home or working from the office) are becoming more of a spectrum.

However unsteady the future seems, our panelists provided insight on what they see as drivers of change. The following drivers describe major changes to the ways we live and work and how we design the spaces in which life happens. They are forces that call on designers to elevate their game at a time when excellence in design is more complicated and nuanced than ever.

The drivers of change below are by no means exhaustive. We know drivers such as climate change, a stronger emphasis on mental health, even the likelihood of future pandemics will all transform our world in ways we cannot predict. But this document aims to reflect the discussion between esteemed panelists during our three Design Essentials panels.

In life and design, there is no such thing as perfection, but we can always strive for progress.

Footnotes

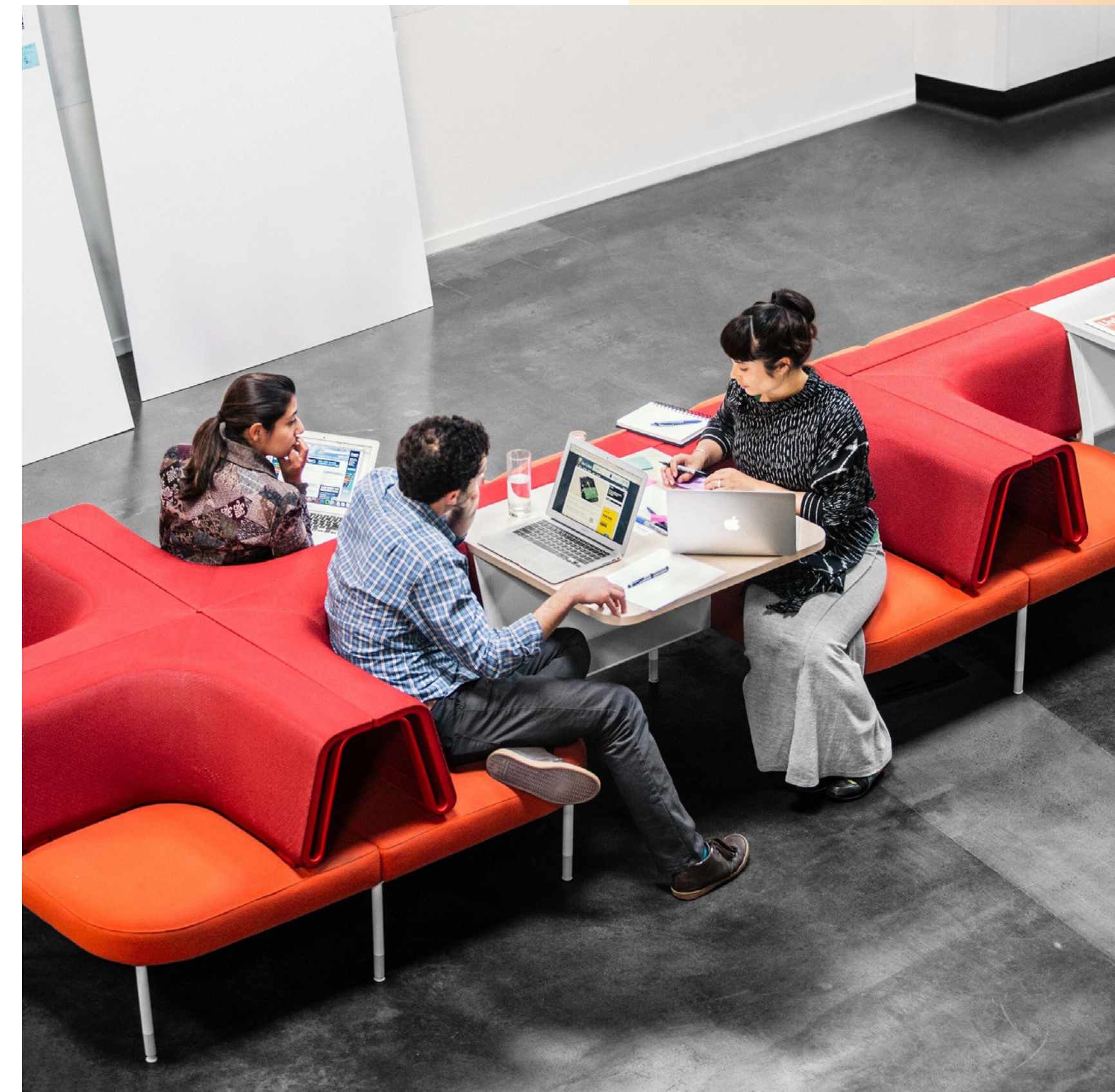
1 “Why this stage of the pandemic makes us so anxious” The Washington Post. August 11, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/08/11/pandemic-anxiety-psychology-delta/>



Drivers of Change

The Uncertain Role of the Office

Working from home during the pandemic has worked well enough to cause both employees and employers to question the purpose of the office. **“We crave human interaction, socialization, but it’s got to be more than that for a company to pay all those real estate dollars,”** says Verda Alexander, co-founder of Studio O+A.



Drivers of Change

The Uncertain Role of the Office

With so many people successfully working from home, the pandemic has created a moment of reflection to consider what the office means symbolically and functionally. **The idea of the office as the default place for work is over, which raises the question, Why have an office?** This reconceiving of the role of the office is leading to shifting values on physical space.

As workers achieve baseline productivity at home, the office becomes a tool to be used for engagement and building culture rather than a container for work. This shift has allowed companies to design spaces less focused on metrics (\$/sq ft) and more focused on human outcomes. “When it comes to companies, their goal, in the end is retention. So now they’re forced to look at the quality of the experience and what it means. It’s no longer about fitting more people in the same square footage,” says Shilpi Kumar, founder of Khoj Lab. Rather than sticking to the extremes of the spectrum—fully remote or fully in-office—companies seem to be settling somewhere in between. The focus is on enabling productivity wherever you are

with variable schedules and divergent spaces, but “there’s going to be a lot of growing pains along the way,” according to Gretta Peterson, Workplace Strategy Lead at MillerKnoll, “We’re on a long journey to get to that place.”

At the start of the lockdown, organizations were focused on making work-from-home work. Now, as organizations explore and refine their approach to hybrid work styles, they will have to contend with a host of new issues. “We’re tapering into a new phase that has to do with logistics, new platforms we’re getting comfortable with,” says Jennifer Kolstad, global design director for Ford Motor Company, “We’re understanding the logistical concerns.” This includes questions of people (e.g. how many days per week, how is that decided), process (e.g. what tech platform will we use) and place (e.g. how many desks do I need for a partially remote team).

“When it comes to companies, their goal, in the end is retention. So now they’re forced to look at the quality of the experience and what it means. It’s no longer about fitting more people in the same square footage.”

Shilpi Kumar
Founder of Khoj Lab



Drivers of Change

The Uncertain Role of the Office

Complicating Factors

➔ Employee and company needs are more complex and varied than ever. Among executives currently working remotely, 44 percent want to return to fully in-office work compared to 17 percent of employees in the same situation.² Some employees have sworn off the office; others can't wait to go back. While 48 percent of workers would rather work from their main workplace two to three days per week, 15 percent would like to work from the office more and 37 percent less.³

44% of executives working remotely want to return to the office full-time

17% of employees working remotely want to return to the office full-time

➔ We still don't know what the long-term effects of mostly remote work will be, and studies on remote work's effect on performance dimensions like innovation and productivity tend to conflict with each other. "One thing we've been looking at on the quant side is how squishy these things get the more abstract you get," says Ali Rayl, VP of product at Slack. "When you talk about productivity or innovation, everyone is trying to quantitatively measure that in different ways, and I think we have a little bit of garbage in, garbage out around those metrics."

Implications for Designers

➔ Designers will need to be ready for higher-level conversations about the office focusing on experience rather than metrics. "The conversation is shifting towards the quality of the space and away from being just about efficiency. It's a really positive trend that we're talking about quality and that we're not relying on our old reference points," says Haley Nelson, senior interior designer at HGA.

➔ Designers will quickly need to solve for both newer and existing ways of working that have been difficult in the pandemic such as hot desking, collaboration between remote and in-person participants, cross-team sharing, engendering belonging, and fostering culture. "It'll be about designing spaces that support new behaviors that we're learning, leveraging technology and how we interact with it," says Nelson.

Footnotes

² Future Forum Pulse. October 5, 2021. <https://www.futureforum.com/pulse-survey>

³ Leesman Workplace 2021 Report. <https://www.leesmanindex.com/media/Leesman-Workplace-2021-Report-1.pdf>

Drivers of Change

Digital + Physical

The pandemic has sped up the adoption of digital tools and practices such as migrating meetings to video calls or adopting non-email communication platforms like Slack. The shared experience of moving work from the office to the internet has elevated the importance of the platforms we use.



Drivers of Change

Digital + Physical

Digital space has become a “place.” We say, “Where are we meeting? Zoom, Slack, Teams?” rather than, “How are we meeting?”

Instead of the default of where work happens, the office is “just one tool in the company’s toolbox,” according to Rayl. **Given the prominence of the digital in modern work, more attention must be paid to how the digital and the physical interface with each other.**

We have adopted digital space as a new space typology, but there are many hybrid spaces along the spectrum of digital to physical. On one end of the spectrum is purely digital space where people can connect through video, chat, channels, and emails. On this end Slack is also exploring purely audio collaboration to combat Zoom fatigue as well as facilitating more asynchronous collaboration. On the other end of the spectrum is purely physical, where all the work happens in a shared physical place. But between the two extremes lay individual spaces to connect with a group of remote colleagues and group spaces to connect with a few remote

colleagues, all the while bringing the tools, platforms, and technology to the physical and/or virtual table.

Recognizing the critical role of technology in space, even before the pandemic Gensler created how-to videos that show people what the room has to offer. Now, says Don Ricker, director of strategy for Gensler, they’ve extended it to explain how the technology layer supports the style of meeting you want to have.

As a stopgap measure, companies have “lifted and shifted” their in-person practices to the digital space. If a team had a 30 minute stand-up meeting in the break room, they now have a 30-minute stand up meeting on a video call. While the “lifting and shifting” approach ensured continuity, it fails to experiment with new ways we could work and connect with each other. **With new tools at our disposal, we must start to question what we do synchronously versus asynchronously, what platforms to use, and how to curate our digital space like we have our physical space.**



Complicating Factors

- ➔ Technology costs will rise in the future as companies seek to create more seamless in-person and remote collaboration. Benchmark costs for technology spending are expected to increase between 8 and 16 percent in the US and Canada.⁴
- ➔ The hidden costs of worker time and energy in learning new tools must also be accounted for. **The second biggest challenge to organizational tech adoption is technology skills among employees.** Organizations can inadvertently disrupt well-established processes and overwhelm already stressed workers by mishandling new technology rollouts to their employees.⁵

Implications for Designers

- ➔ **Designers need to be designing for two places at once, the meeting room and the virtual experience of remote participants.** “Thinking about inclusivity, we’re looking at the meeting room. How do you maintain the inclusivity when you have people in the room and people not in the room?” says Alexander.
- ➔ **Designers will need to bring in and collaborate more closely with IT** to ensure that the digital tools, processes, behaviors, and the physical environment are supporting one another. “We should not just design a room and then let IT figure it out. It’s not the IT consultant’s role, it’s all of our jobs to make sure that it’s working,” says Ricker.
- ➔ **Designers will need to stay on top of new technology,** both software and hardware, to inform and advise their clients. Ricker says, “We’re looking for our teams to be more diverse and well-informed about technologies to help us collaborate directly with the client. We’re looking for what’s next and what’s best.”

Footnotes

4 JLL U.S. & Canada Fit Out Guide 2021. <https://www.us.jll.com/en/trends-and-insights/research/us-and-canada-office-fit-out-guide-2021>
5 Tailored with Technology. The Economist Intelligence Unit. September 30, 2019. <https://institutional.anz.com/tailored-with-technology>

Drivers of Change

Employee Autonomy

The great interruption to our normal habits of work due to the pandemic created a moment of reflection during which many employees re-evaluated their relationship with work. “One of my drivers of change is this narrative change to the idea that work is the most important, life is secondary. You work to meet the next step, that’s how you define your success in life. **The narrative has shifted to focus on quality of life,**” says Kumar.



Drivers of Change

Employee Autonomy

Employees are realizing the power they have and are emboldened to make choices for themselves about how they work. “In the past you expected your employer was setting expectations on what work meant or where work should be happening. Now the power has shifted to the individual and away from the organization,” says Nelson. Companies are finding out the hard way, via mass resignations, when they aren’t meeting their employees’ needs.

One of the most obvious demands employees have is autonomy in where they work. “The flexibility is key,” says Rayl. “I now expect flexibility in where I work and when I work. More than any other factor, that is what’s driving people to say ‘If this place is not suiting my needs as a human, then I’m out.’”

Autonomy, however, must be given in a way that provides a sense of certainty to prevent stress. The uncertainty of the world at large compounded uncertainty at work—especially early in the pandemic. “This pandemic has really magnified the idea that we don’t have choice and we don’t have security in our world,” says Dr. Dan Radecki, co-founder of the Academy for Brain-Based Leadership. That lack of security can have devastating impacts on our brains. “The way the brain sees change is that it’s a threat. When change comes about, it causes stress. When it’s too much change that we don’t feel we can control, that stress starts to overwhelm us,” he says. The stress from change neurologically hinders creativity, emotional self-awareness, and the ability to deal with others.

While many employees embrace their newfound autonomy, others are uneasy with that decision-making power. “People are asking for a self-assessment toolkit because they’re uncomfortable making these decisions,” says Kolstad. Companies and designers have to

support the full spectrum of employees, from those who want maximum control to those who want help making decisions about where, when, and how to work.

As companies scramble to retain talent, flexibility is a must, but so is creating a sense of community among their employees. **“Human connection matters. You can’t always measure why, but it can make for workplace that people enjoy being at,” says Rayl.**

The workplace historically played a role fostering community. Proximity is an important factor of social connection, but that lever is compromised when people aren’t in the office every day. While space can help with social connection, organizations need to use all the tools at their disposal to connect their employees to each other and to the mission of the organization.



Complicating Factors

- ➔ Many factors are contributing to the Great Resignation: the quick ramp-up and volatility of the economy, the abundance of open jobs, some government assistance.⁶ However, it is unclear how long this balance of power will remain. *If the economy starts to shrink and jobs become harder to come by, will employers regain more leverage in setting expectations around where and when people work?*⁷
- ➔ While flexibility is ideal, the more options employers provide, the more work it will take to manage that variety of choices. For example, allowing total flexibility for when employees come into the office requires setting up systems to help them know who else will be there. Otherwise, they might commute to the office just to sit by themselves. *“In the next era of work, we can no longer make the assumption that everyone will be in the office at the same time, which means that organizations need to make a conscious effort to bring the right people together at the right time.”*⁸

Footnotes

6 “Why Literally Millions of Americans Are Quitting Their Jobs” Time Magazine. October 13, 2021. <https://time.com/6106322/the-great-resignation-jobs/>

7 “American workers rush to take advantage of pandemic bargaining power.” NBC News. August 22, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/american-workers-rush-take-advantage-pandemic-bargaining-power-n1277309>

8 Enhancing experience and collaboration. Condeco. 2021. <https://www.condecosoftware.com/modern-workplace/asset/ebooks/condeco-conversations-ebook-experience-and-collaboration/?submissionGuid=30d2ba52-248d-4af0-bfc8-ee44aa4bf3b5>

Implications for Designers

- ➔ Designers will need to help companies tell the story of who they are and what they stand for to their own employees. Alexander says, “What’s really exciting about having an interiors practice is that you get to work with all levels of a corporation, and in a good relationship you get to engage in a conversation around what the corporation is about, what it stands for. And that’s what we’re trying to embed in the storytelling of the space.” *Employees will use this story to determine whether or not they belong at that company.*
- ➔ Designers need to develop structured ways to talk about needs that balance the functional needs of the team and the personal needs of the employee. “It’s about listening to people. It’s more thoughtful engagement with the people within an organization,” says Nelson.
- ➔ By engaging with IT, human resources, facilities management, and end-users, designers can inform policies that give the right level of autonomy with the right level of guidance to help employees choose what’s right for them. “We’re working with IT and the end-users, these are new conversations with new people at the table who have never been at the table before. We’re all trying to solve problems and arrive at solutions together,” says Peterson.
- ➔ In terms of helping companies with retention, Alexander cautions, “There’s only so much you can do as a designer. *So much relies on how the company shows up for their own employees.*”

Drivers of Change

Equity and Belonging

The pandemic coincided with a cultural spotlight being placed on racial injustice, which combined to bring about a tighter focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. The design profession feels a responsibility to engage in this dialectic and work harder to make the buildings and spaces we inhabit more welcoming to all.



Drivers of Change

Equity and Belonging

Working from home has raised issues of equity and belonging in surprising ways. “Speaking as a white woman, I was able to feel belonging at the office. **For Black people in the workplace, however, their belonging scores have actually increased a ton during the pandemic. Not being at the office has actually been beneficial,” says Rayl.** Realizations like this have further emphasized how much needs to change to make the office work for everyone.

As more people have started to engage in the topic of equity, it has expanded, stretching to also consider dimensions of equity beyond race, gender, and sexual identity.

- “Health equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible” says Kolstad. For example, everyone in offices and factories should have access to natural light.
- The work experience of place-independent workers (those who can work from anywhere), and those of place-dependent workers (those in industrial or manufacturing roles) should be equitable.
- Neurodiverse employees—those who process information differently—should have access to the spaces and tools to help them complete their work.
- There should be equity in the experience of those in the meeting room and those joining remotely from home.

“Having DEI embedded in our corporate strategy has made it a whole lot easier to implement some of the things we’ve wanted to do for a long time.”

Ann Noe
Senior Program Manager of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at MillerKnoll

By accounting for the needs of those who have previously been overlooked, companies, designers, and even cities hope to bring about a more harmonious future in which more people feel they belong. A key strategy for more equitable design is bringing more employee voices to design discussions. **“We can’t design for them without bringing them in the design process,” says Ann Noe,** Senior Program Manager of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at MillerKnoll.

More and more companies are weaving their diversity goals into their strategy to great effect. “Having DEI embedded in our corporate strategy has made it a whole lot easier to implement some of the things we’ve wanted to do for a long time,” says Noe.

Complicating Factors

- ➔ Designing spaces for inclusion starts with bringing a greater diversity of voices into architecture as a profession. Kimberly Dowdell, Principal at HOK Chicago, says, “As architects, we are authors of the future for the built environment and I think that the people who are shaping communities should reflect the communities that they are shaping.”
- ➔ While the intent to make spaces that work for all is there, finding a perfect solution that meets everyone’s needs can feel like an exercise in futility. A solution that would help one under-served group could be a hindrance to another. “[Neurodiverse folks are coming into the work place, and it’s important to be cognizant of how to best foster environments where people can feel a greater sense of belonging and accommodation.](#) For example, there might be issues with patterns that are distracting for some, while for others pattern is helpful.” says Dowdell.
- ➔ Understanding the population you are designing for helps make sure their needs are addressed, but some dimensions of diversity are what Radecki describes as “invisible,” such as neurodiversity, and some employees will be unwilling to share their situations due to lingering stigma.⁹

Implications for Designers

- ➔ Designers need to educate themselves on these topics¹⁰ and find ways to raise the question of equity again and again within their design process. Dowdell recognizes the importance of “ensuring the professionals that are supporting community projects are diverse and knowledgeable and ready to help design a better future for that project and community.”
- ➔ There’s no one solution that will work for everyone, so the question of equity will require innovation, creativity, and trial and error on behalf of designers. “We’re looking at every one of our projects as a pilot in and of itself, learning and testing and evolving as we go, hoping that every project gets better and better,” says Peterson.

Footnotes

9 Disclosure and workplace accommodations for people with autism: a systematic review. Disability and rehabilitation. 2019

10 “Breaking the Silence in Design: Where do we go from here?” IIDA 2020 Student Roundtable. <https://iida.org/course/breaking-the-silence-in-design-where-do-we-go-from-here>

A+D in the Future

What can the Architecture and Design profession do to better prepare for the future? What skills, capabilities, and practices can it develop? Our panelists touched on many ideas, but the following improvement areas stood out.

01

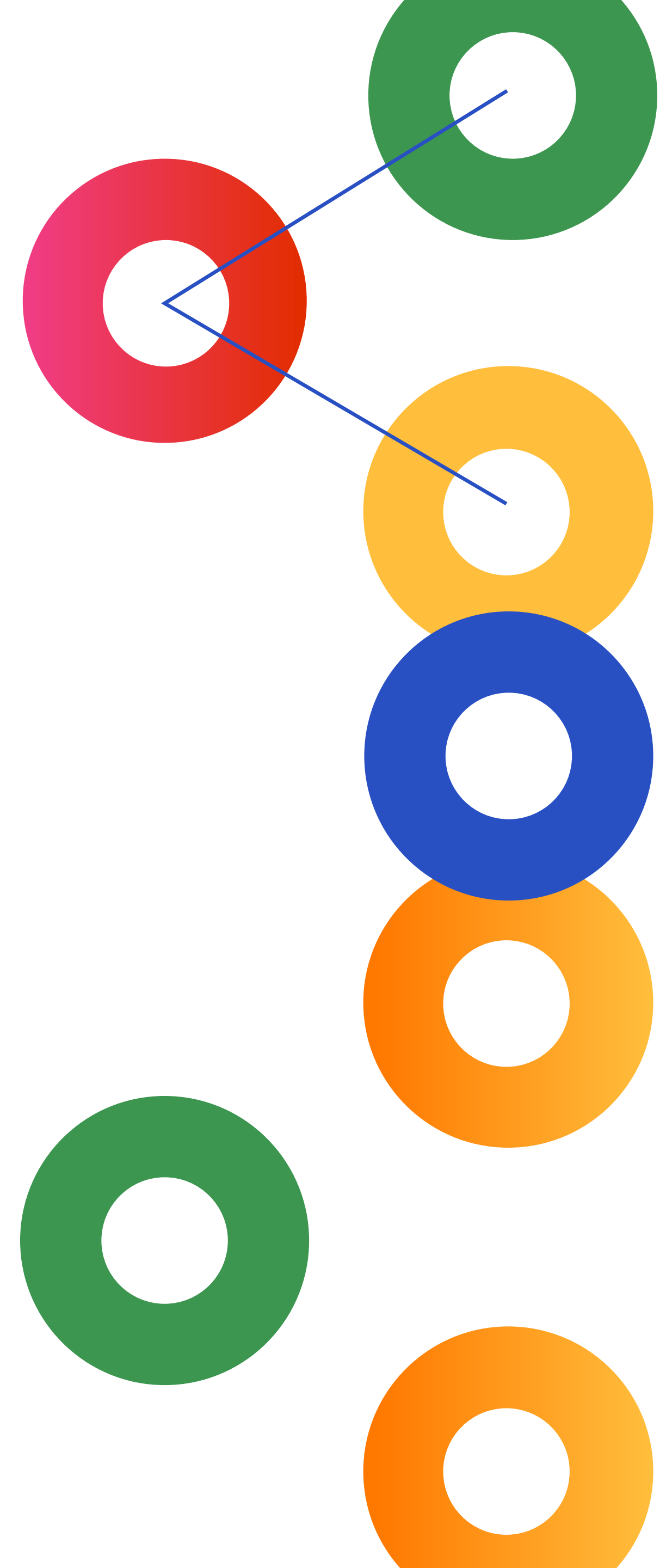
Participatory Design

To design authentically for diverse populations, design must find ways of shifting the end-users' role from a source of information to a frequent collaborator in the process. Ongoing collaboration will include familiar key functions such as facilities management, but also a closer tie to human resources and IT. Bringing more voices into the process makes it more complex and more difficult to manage, but ensures the end product is closer to the ideal experience.

02

Diversity in A+D

In order to design for diverse populations, the A+D profession itself needs to reexamine its own barriers that are keeping members of underrepresented groups from bringing their skills and experience to the profession. Taking a critical eye to the education and career path for designers could illuminate new ways of training and accrediting designers that give everyone a chance to succeed and contribute. Programs like HOK's Tapestry, a database of potential collaborators, makes finding the right partner, including small businesses or minority- or women-owned organizations, easier. It helps level the playing field and makes project teams more reflective of the population for whom they are designing.



03

Quality Data

While space analytics has made great strides, design professionals will need to become more adept at synthesizing a variety of data sources, both quantitative and qualitative, to derive meaning for their customers. “Qualitative requires us to engage and take action with people rather than transacting,” says Ricker. Thick data—the stories, perceptions, and experiences of end users—married with quantitative data such as emerging sensor and digital behavior data will be more accurate and more impactful to customers. As spatial analytics become more and more sophisticated, designers will need to learn about the hardware and software infrastructure for building data, treating it as a new building service alongside HVAC, energy, and elevators.

04

Pilots

The world has changed dramatically in the last two years, and it will only continue to do so. In order to adapt to that change, individual businesses must adjust and work according to their own goals, contexts, and limitations. Between massive macro change and the unique requirements of each organization, tried and true solutions will have less and less relevance going forward. Therefore, the future belongs to those who can design and execute pilots with clear ways to measure and learn from these experiments. The scope and dependence upon pilots must increase so that organizations can test ideas before they make changes. Piloting will also increase in frequency, moving away from monolithic redesign to constant, gradual evolution. This implies a new relationship with clients defined by ongoing collaboration instead of episodic transactions. Firms might consider changing contract and billing structures based on iterative design and learning rather than infrequent large projects.

Conclusion

While no one can predict the future, we can recognize the ways that it’s changing today and prepare for the likely repercussions. **Design has the potential to have a great impact on the world, helping it become a more just and harmonious place for everyone.** Like our panelists, we know designers feel the burden of making choices that will affect many, but are hopeful that they can make them responsibly and empathetically, with excitement and hope for a better tomorrow.

