

# Design Museum Magazine

# The Future of the Office

The Ways Work Works  
(And When it Doesn't)

An isometric illustration of a modern office environment. The office is composed of several interconnected platforms and desks in shades of orange, red, and purple. People are shown in various work-related activities: one person is sitting on a high platform looking at a tablet, another is sitting on a desk with a laptop, a third is sitting on a chair reading a document, and a fourth is sitting on a desk with a laptop and a plant. There are also various office supplies like books, a coffee cup, and a potted plant. The overall style is clean and modern.

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# Possibility by Design.

## Welcome to the Workplace Innovation Issue

By Elizabeth Lowrey IIDA, RDI, Principal, Elkus Manfredi Architects

**“We must not make decisions based on fear, but on hope and possibility.”**

Bruce Mau, Director, Bruce Mau Design and 2007 AIGA Medal recipient

The world’s most terrible events have, for the most part, happened one at a time. But not today. Today, multiple major disasters are colliding—the political, the economic, social justice, climate change, the deadly pandemic. These are fires that have long been smoldering, some for centuries, but they have all burst into flame at the same moment, with COVID-19 as an accelerant.

This moment is really the opportunity for massive change. There actually is no other choice—this is the tipping point. We’ve been awakened to the urgency of finding solutions, and as Bruce Mau points out, we have no choice but to be optimistic, because there is no alternative. Our sense of urgency is a rallying cry for designers to seize the opportunities inherent in the moment and get to work.

The Harvard Business Review, in the article “The Right Way to Lead Design Thinking,” defines design thinking as solving problems by understanding human emotions, prototyping ideas, tolerating failure, and trying again and again until you get it right. The article is not focused on the application of design thinking in the design world, but in the worlds of business and nonprofit organizations across every industry. In a time when innovation is the key to success, business thinkers have been desperately searching for ways to make innovation part of every job, and they have found what they need in the creative professions.

Design thinking teaches us to have a vision of a desired outcome and systematically work toward it. It prepares us to listen to others and also to the creative voice within. It demands that we be inclusive and equitable—when we do our best work at Elkus Manfredi Architects, it’s because we have artists, tech wizards, landscape architects, industrial designers, craftspeople, and many more making decisions. Together, the creative richness of many voices produces better solutions than a designer working alone. The more different the voices, the more innovative the thought.

As designers, we’ve been trained in design thinking, and we apply this thinking daily in our work. We trust the process, we know it works, and we know it reliably solves problems and produces innovative thought. In this moment, designers are applying design thinking to all types of workplaces: schools, hospitals, retail, restaurants, theaters, hotels, offices—spaces that create and support a community—and coming up with innovative solutions that will make these places better for all.

I believe that the newfound sense of urgency is great enough to galvanize the design community to come together with the scientists, community organizers, economists, business people, politicians, doctors, and others who are seeking solutions. We are all working toward the same goals. Design is integral to solving the problems we are all grappling with, and design thinking is the ideal tool to produce creative solutions in the midst of complex, unknown conditions. We must make a difference. It’s our responsibility.



This rendering is a study for an office tower lobby that marries humanity offering all the inclusive community elements that empower innovation. Airy, green, inviting, interactive, and hi-tech, this space incorporates new health and safety features, while giving occupants a sense of choice, control, and freedom of movement. Rather than restricting people, as many fear will be the result of COVID-19, this is a welcoming place for both gathering and solitary enjoyment, enabling people to safely and confidently engage in the community that we all need.