

NEW NORMAL: REDIFINING WORKSPACES

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With the back to normal, even though teleworking will continue for some time, the return to workspaces has been progressively resumed. These offices have to be previously adapted to the new demands; safety distance between workstations, redesigning of common areas, etc. All this

without losing sight of other factors such as the use of natural resources, aesthetics or adaptation to digital environments



In addition, according to data from Savills Aguirre Newman, enquiries about available offices rose by 40% compared to those received in March and April. This could indicate a growing interest in the change of headquarters location by some firms. For this reason, at Iberian Lawyer we wanted to talk to the heads of some of the leading architecture studios in Madrid, Rafael de La-Hoz and Volta, architects of emblematic law firms in our country, to ask them how the pandemic has influenced the redefinition of office space.

POST-COVID-19 SPACES

"In the short and medium-term, it will certainly be possible to adapt the workspaces to this new situation," replies **Francisco Arévalo** (pictured second left), design director at **Rafael de La-Hoz**. "In the offices, before the pandemic, occupations of up to 1 person every 6m² were requested, when what was usual was 1/10 or 1/8. When we designed Distrito C (Telefónica's headquarters in Las Tablas in 2004), the ratio was one person every 12-14m². This evolution concerning the occupation of office space was surely generated by the price of a square meter of land in the centre of a large city, and the use and profitability that large companies wanted to obtain," says Arévalo.

His colleague, **Carolina Fernández** (pictured first left), project director at Rafael de La-Hoz, adds that "in the face of current events it has been possible to 'force' teleworking on many types of jobs, without the need to be in the office in person. Logically, this has been possible thanks to the technological capacity we have today. It is possible that this situation in the medium or long term will disappear and we can return to the previous 'normal'. If this happens, it will surely take a long time to achieve it, and the combination of on-site and remote work will be the most common in those professions that allow it. Workspaces can change in this respect. Fewer people occupancy in the same space (greater distance between workers) and much more restricted common spaces in their use. Face-to-face relationships by shifts and teams and not necessarily every day or every week. Greater comfort and better conditions in terms of air conditioning, ventilation, lighting, etc."

"To begin with, the return of a worker to his workplace after this period will not be easy, and there will be more favourable situations than others," contributes **José Luis Susín** (pictured first right), design director at **Volta**. "What is clear is that successful office design is one that worked perfectly before the pandemic and has hardly been affected after it."

"A few years ago, there was an ad for a minivan, big enough for the time, where the main slogan was: 'What if luxury is space?' And it was, and it is. We've seen it in tiny homes and offices full of people who are unviable in the face of a pandemic like the one we're experiencing," says Arévalo. "In short, we do see that the current circumstances are a moment of opportunity to rethink many aspects that were on the table but had not been addressed, such as improving our working environments, work flexibility, work-family balance and work by objectives. But having the will and the economic

capacity to do so is a different matter. What is clear is that we are at a turning point, from which it would be desirable to learn."

SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

"In recent years there has been an increasing concern in the office market to achieve zero or almost zero consumption, along with an awareness of making more sustainable buildings, which together with the appearance of Leed, Bream and, above all, Well certificates, have significantly contributed to achieving greater comfort in new office buildings, or in those rehabilitations where it has been possible to implement it. These trends have helped to make workspaces more comfortable and friendly than what used to be a traditional office," says Arévalo, who explains that, among other aspects, common relationship areas among workers are emphasised and promoted (relax areas, informal meetings, outdoor sports areas, etc.), but "just this type of space will be penalised for a while, or its use will be made under certain conditions, above all by maintaining the safety distances recommended by the health authorities. This means that measures involving this type of certificate help these new workspaces, but logically they must be completed by the conditions that have to be taken in the immediate future. We certainly see that at this time, measures aimed at increasing the safety of employees need to be reinforced."

"Any new scenario is an opportunity to rethink the workspace," says **Pepe Susín** (pictured second right), design co-director at Volta. "Although the restrictions arising from the COVID-19 should not mean a revolution in office design, but respect for the principles which have always been there and which are present in all our projects: large spaces, natural lighting and facilities geared towards user comfort. Now is the time not to hesitate when choosing between the profitability of the square metres and the employee well-being, and to always opt for the latter in a stimulating architectural environment."

"On an architectural level," says Carolina, "many companies have already launched new products on the market that allow this feeling to be achieved by adopting specific measures that are easy to apply, such as replacing carpet tiles with physical distance signs, directionality signs and reminder messages, as well as adding physical separators between workstations such as partitions. The latter can include acoustically absorbent materials, thus substantially improving acoustic comfort. From the systems installations point of view, there are various air purifiers with photo hydrolysis that can be implemented in air conditioning and ventilation that help considerably to disinfect and purify the air and surfaces of the workspaces, eliminating viruses, mould, bacteria and odours, even lowering somewhat the energy consumption and therefore the cost of air conditioning. With regard to lighting, if the occupancy is reduced, the type of lighting could be replaced and/or implemented by more 'individualised' systems (table lamps) where the person has more control over the type and amount of lighting needed at any given time. Also, psychologically it is better for the worker, who feels that he can personalise his job. All this has also a direct impact on the office space comfort, which, together with the measures already being taken in most new offices, will be able to make a healthier and more comfortable space."

CENTRE OR PERIPHERY?

"This question is very subjective and has no universal answer," answers José Luis Susín, from Volta. "Each company must put on its scale what is most important for the development of its business and in the case of law firms, a very powerful factor is the location of its headquarters as well as the comfort of its workers and clients."

"In the 2008 crisis, many offices were moved to the city outskirts precisely because of the lower cost per square metre compared to the centre of large cities. Same space, less cost, but more workers commuting and more hours 'lost' in these journeys from home to work and vice versa," responds Carolina Fernandez. "Big companies like Telefónica or Banco de Santander did it a few years ago by

selling their urban properties, concentrating most of their workers in one financial 'campus'. This also allowed them to create an environment adapted to their specific needs and with a strong corporate image. Years later, this trend changed, with some companies returning to locations closer to city centres, as Repsol did in 2014, at the new headquarters we designed in Calle Méndez Alvaro. Even companies like Ikea or Media Markt, which until then had only been located in industrial estates on the outskirts of cities, opened more 'urban' stores in the cities. Large law firms opened their offices in the city centre (Garrigues, Uría Menéndez, Allen & Overy, etc.). In this case, the proximity to the clients was an essential factor, and it seems that it still is."

"What will happen in the offices after this pandemic and foreseeably with the impending economic crisis? -asks Francisco Arevalo, who then responds "we believe that there are many factors that can influence another change in the general trend to return to the periphery of cities. Undoubtedly the economic factor has the most weight, and this will depend on the evolution of each sector in the short and medium-term. But, among other aspects, how the worker moves to his or her office will also influence. We have seen how in recent weeks the pollution level in large cities has been drastically reduced as no vehicles could drive through them. This circumstance has made us all more aware of the impact of our activity on the environment. According to recent news, the virus infection in public transport (mainly the underground) has been very high as these are very crowded and cannot keep the minimum safety distance. In this sense, working 'remotely' from home combined with on-site work can make both scenarios viable. It will surely depend on the financial 'lungs' of each company and the image it wants to project to its customers. It is possible that telework combined with face-to-face work will allow many firms to continue with a (perhaps smaller and more optimised) headquarters in a representative location as they may not have a full staff every day. In addition, it will mean less consumption and therefore less expenditure, mainly on air conditioning and lighting.

DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

For Carolina Fernández, it is clear that "the technological capacity we have today has allowed us to adapt this new situation to certain professions. Video conferences have replaced both work trips and endless meetings that have become more agile and efficient by making them in less time. It increases individual productivity, probably with less work stress. Attendance has been shown to be non-mandatory and that there are more flexible forms of work thanks to technology. The bet of the law firms is to invest and adapt their spaces to them. Therefore, it can be said that the COVID-19 has undoubtedly accelerated the digitalisation of the world of work. Although it is true that, in certain circumstances, 'face-to-face' activity is still necessary and, therefore, it will be necessary to combine the two realities, on the one hand, having a high degree of technology in the office and on the other hand, adapting and equipping workspaces with all the needs imposed by the current pandemic."

"We see technology as an additional layer to our architecture, which is absolutely essential, but which is becoming obsolete very quickly. Technologies that were previously unique to advanced corporate environments are now captured in any mobile phone. Probably the only requirement for adapting the workspace to the digital environment is the guarantee of being connected," adds Pepe Susín.

CASES OF SUCCESS

José Luis Susín, from Volta, highlights the new offices they designed for **Allen & Overy** in Madrid. "The main role played by natural light makes it a fresh and pleasant space, where natural materials provide warmth and create an optimal atmosphere for concentration. The client opted for generosity in space as opposed to maximum use of surface area, which means that practically all the workstations are still useful with the current restrictions." **Antonio Vázquez-Guillén**, co-managing partner of Allen & Overy Spain, states that "from the first moment we had full confidence in Volta as

we saw that their proposal was perfectly aligned with our project, one of the most important ones carried out by our firm in Spain in recent years. They are a team of top-level professionals who managed to create a workspace that transmitted the values of Allen & Overy. For us, characteristics such as transparency, the use of natural light, collaborative spaces and ensuring that our team had all the comforts and facilities to carry out their job and thus provide the best service to our clients, were a priority. Volta worked in a truly exceptional way on our project as if we were a single team and they made Serrano 73 the headquarters with which we now feel deeply identified."

At Rafael de La-Hoz studio," says Francisco Arevalo, "the projects that have been carried out for important law firms have been integral rehabilitation of buildings in 'premium' urban areas, in which almost only the supporting structure of the reformed buildings has been maintained, modifying the façade and the interiors. We have carried out renovations, on different scales, of several law firms in Madrid, including those of **Garrigues, Uría Menéndez**, of the building that currently houses **Pérez-Llorca** and the renovation of the façade of the building where Allen & Overy is located. In the case of Uría Menéndez, in 2000 we remodelled its magnificent building in Príncipe de Vergara, a work by Eleuterio Población, with the utmost respect for its inherited heritage, providing greater representation and contributing to the updating and adaptation of its workspaces. 15 years later, we modernised their client areas and then planned the expansion of their headquarters through the rehabilitation of a nearby building. Normally we try to provide the client with a unique and representative image for each building we do in Rafael de La-Hoz, but always taking care of all their needs. For us, each project is unique, and if the client is satisfied, it is already a design success story."

Pepe Susín, architect at Volta, highlights the interior design of the Castelar building that houses the headquarters of Pérez-Llorca where "we bet strongly on the meeting space for the client. The user's experience in this magnificent building is that of accessing a grandiose environment flooded by natural light. The interior design had to be responsible, and up to the task, so all the attention was given to this almost mystical space that is generously bathed in light. A large library converted into sculpture, folding walls that seem to hide secret rooms and black stone tunnels that give way to meeting rooms, are the elements that draw this space where the client feels at ease in spaces of great width and luminosity."

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