

HOME|OFFICE

Reinventing the office block for living in the post-covid City

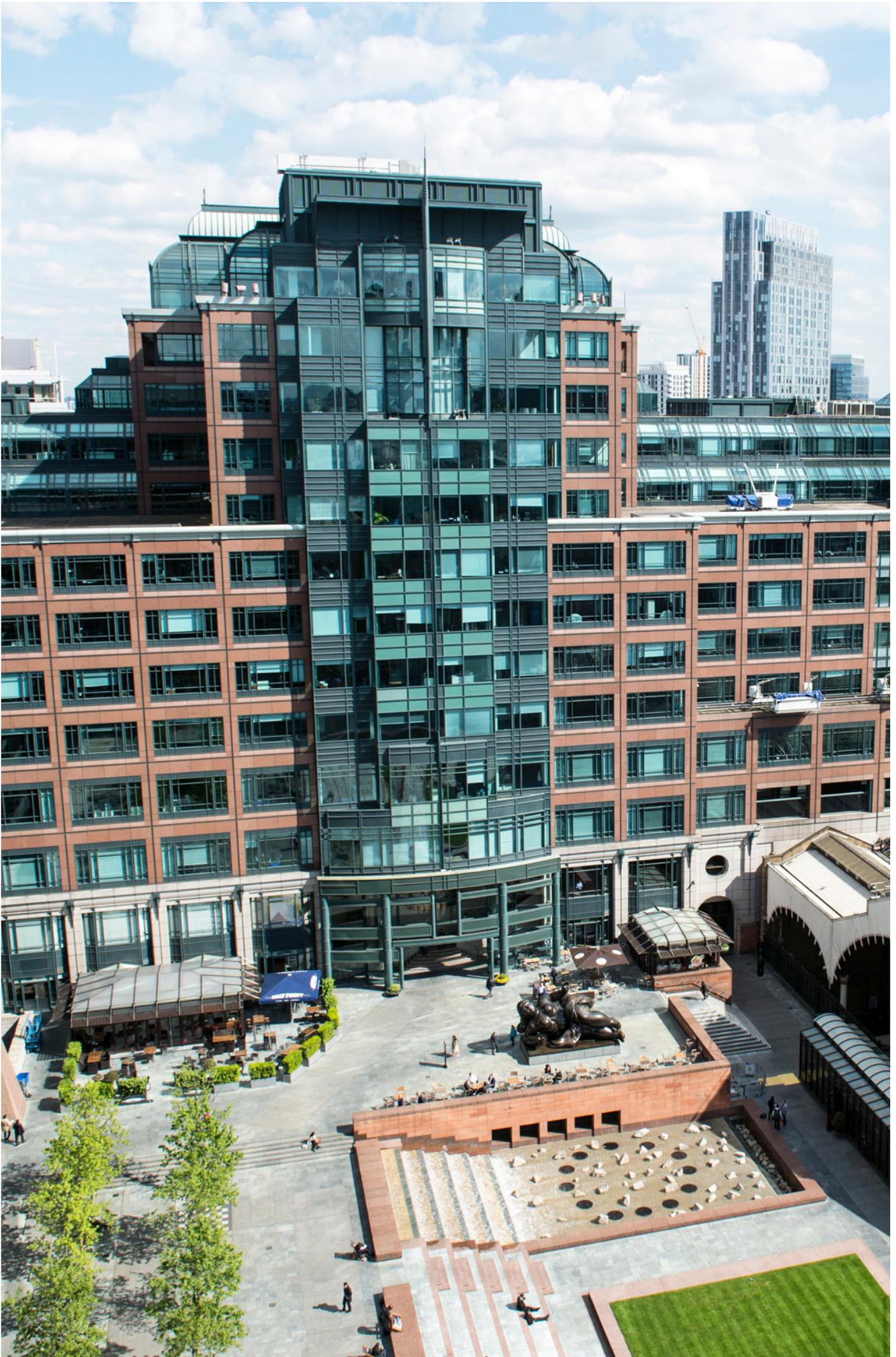
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Brief

HIGHER GOAL

UN SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing
UN SDG 8 Decent Work & Economic Growth
UN SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities
UN SDG 11 Sustainable Cities & Communities

OBJECTIVE

The post-covid city has seen a huge reduction in the need for office space, and companies are looking at a permanent shift to more flexible working patterns. Additionally, the new permitted development rights are making it even easier for developers to transform existing buildings into housing outside the City of London. This Think Tank will explore the opportunities that lie in this newly released real estate.

Overall Objective: To create informed, provocative and inspirational design proposals that question how we utilise redundant office space in the city to create a more democratic and diverse city centre.

WHY

1. The pandemic has transformed the city centre:

London is a global city and one of the financial centres of the world with 5.5 million jobs. In January 2020, in the City of London alone there were over 500,000 people employed, three-quarters of which in financial, professional, and associated business services. As well as the thousands of cleaners, delivery people, transport workers, street cleaners, vendors, retailers and other service sector workers dependent on the office economy. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the office workers fled to the suburbs and the City of London became a ghost town. Overnight TfLs ridership decreased 90% as people worked from home. Once familiar sites, full of tourists and shoppers, became eerily quiet and abandoned. In fact, many of the qualities that made London a global city have been revealed to be its vulnerabilities:

- Reliance on international tourism
- High concentration of financial and other office workers
- World class cultural attractions
- Reliance on effective public transport network

2. There are longer-term changes to working patterns:

Working from home, in its myriad incarnations, has become the new norm for good or for bad. In May, Twitter announced that its workers don't have to ever come back to the office and Facebook acknowledged that within 5 years, 50% of its workforce will be working from home. Google has extended its wfh policy and cancelled a number of its new build and fit out projects around the world. With the global players leading the change to more flexible working, the central London office HQ for all workers becomes

redundant.

3. We need to rethink how we designate the city

centre: Today, over 50% of office space in Central London remains empty – equivalent to 50 O2 arenas. And with a Covid resurgence and a second national lockdown, going back to 'normal' working patterns seems less likely. At this point in time it is important to explore the city's current zoning policies, currently designating swathes of central London largely for commercial space.

4. There are redundant office blocks which need a new

use: In light of the Climate Crisis, it is crucial we focus on how to retrofit redundant office space into new uses, rather than demolishing and starting again. As the crisis goes on, we must consider the resilience of the buildings we are designing long-term and how adaptable they are to future change.

WHAT

Key Research Questions:

- What impact has the Covid-19 pandemic had on office space in the city? Who was still working in the city during the pandemic?
- What is the future of the large-scale deep-floorplate office block in central London? What impact has the pandemic had on longer-term plans for companies in terms of more agile working?
- How can existing office buildings be converted to new uses, for example affordable housing or workspace? How can these buildings be resilient to allow for adaption to new uses in the future?
- What additional infrastructure is needed to support city centre housing? For example, childcare, affordable shops and workspace, community space etc.
- How can we harness the opportunity of repurposing existing office space to make a more diverse and democratic city centre, thereby improving spatial equality?

WHERE

One Exchange Square - ex-EBRD HQ, Broadgate
The existing tenant (EBRD) are moving to Canary Wharf, leaving a huge vertical slice of the city empty

WHO

Research is intended for:

- GLA Officers / City of London Corporation
- Developers holding disused office buildings in Central London
- Community groups, including community land trusts and local business groups.

Who are we designing for?

Consider both those working in the office buildings and the people who currently service them (cleaners, service workers, transport workers, nurses).

Consider the demographics of Hackney and the City of London, and the different groups of people who work and live in the City.

HOW

Week 01: RESEARCH (17 Nov)

Group 01: Political Context & Economics

- What is the future of the workplace in London?
Longer term plans for remote working or decantralisation?
Current state of the market?
- An understanding of the policy context for city zoning of commercial buildings in Central London
- An understanding of current planning policy changes and how these might impact on ability to retrofit existing buildings
- What economic models have been explored elsewhere which might be applicable to London? i.e around flexible lettings and space allocation.
- An understanding how the real estate players plan to adapt to the current and forthcoming market challenges.
- Review and refine the mapping from Design Cities to relate to the research questions in the brief (empty office audit of the city / landuse map of Broadgate area).

Group 02: Architectural Context

- Exemplars of mixed-use community buildings from different global cities - choose one building each for an in-depth study. Try and choose global cities from different continents to inform our work in London, i.e Hong Kong, New York, Caracas, Mexico City.
- How can lessons learnt from these global examples be translated to London?
- How resilient are these buildings to adapt to future changes?

Suggested Precedents: Torre de David, Caracas (resident takeover of unfinished block). Marina City, Chicago – Goldberg (mixed-use public housing block). New York Downtown Athletic Club - Starrett & Van Vleck (highlighted by Rem Koolhaas in Delirious New York). Lina Bo Boardi, Pompeia, Sao Paulo. SESC 24 de Maio, Sao Paulo, by MMBS an Paulo Mendes da Rocha. MVRDV conversion of Shenzhen building. Bordeaux Housing, Lacaton & Vassal.

Week 02: TEST (24 Nov)

All: Site Visit - EBRD Building, One Exchange Square, Broadgate

Group 01: Sections

Cut a series of sections through the building, analysing the space as existing, and options for retrofitting the building. What activities could the building accommodate, what are the opportunities and constraints of the current building floor plan and envelope?

Group 02: People - Brief Building

Start to map the social economic context around the EBRD building - understand who lives and works in the area and why people would spend time there, what social infrastructure already exists and what is lacking.

Begin to brainstorm WHO you are designing for and WHAT activities the building could hold. What might be needed in the building to support the new housing, what other facilities may be required in the future?

Talk by Linzi Cassels Future of the Workplace

Next activities to be defined as the brief developed.

READING LIST

Books / Reports

'Delirious New York', Rem Koolhaas, 1978
'How Buildings Learn', Stewart Brand, 1994
'Flexible Housing', Jeremy Till and Tatjana Schneider, 2006
'The housing design handbook: A guide to good practice'.
Levitt, D., & McCafferty, J. 2019
'Common Space: The City as Commons (In Common)'
Stavros Stavrides, 2016.
'Tower and Office: From Modernist Theory to Contemporary Practice', Iñaki Abalos, Juan Herreros, 2003
'Freedom to Build', John Turner, 1972
'Mobile Architecture', Yona Friedman, 1958
GLA Circular Economy Primer (https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/design_for_a_circular_economy_web.pdf)
Office to Resi Conversions (https://issuu.com/levittbernstein/docs/end-pdr-for-office-to-resi_print)

Articles

<https://perkinswill.com/news/preparing-for-whats-next-in-the-face-of-uncertainty/>
<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/office-work-is-changing-but-it-wont-disappear-say-architects>
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53901310>

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Brief

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/24/pandemic-accelerate-evolution-cities-covid-19-norman-foster>

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/aug/13/office-pods-may-be-the-answer-to-working-safely-post-covid-19>

<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2020/09/12/covid-19-has-forced-a-radical-shift-in-working-habits>

<https://www.spatialagency.net/> (general reference)

Videos / Events

<https://nla.london/videos/the-resilient-city>

<https://www.nla.london/videos/long-term-resilience>

<https://www.nla.london/videos/build-back-better-reworking-office-space-powered-by-pechakucha>

Video on Torre David - <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/torredavid/49094660>

