

The Influence of Hospitality in the Workplace

A Q&A with Rottet Studios on the evolving workplace interior.

by Mia Nacamulli



Bernhardt Showroom, New York, NY.

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For the past three years Metropolis's director of design innovation, Susan S. Szenasy, has been leading Think Tank, a series of discussions with industry leaders on important issues surrounding human-centered design. On April 19th, at Rotett Studio in Houston, she spoke with a panel of hoteliers, developers, and commercial brokers about the impact of hospitality in the workplace and how offices are taking cues from the hospitality industry in designing comfortable, service-oriented workspaces. What follows is an edited transcript of the conversation, prepared by M. Nacamulli.

Susan S. Szenasy, director of design innovation, Metropolis magazine (SSS): At a time when technology is simultaneously distancing us and bringing us closer, we are using design to reconnect. Houston is in the midst of this trend of using design to ensure connection and communication in the workplace. Lauren Rottet, what are your clients asking for in terms of hospitality work infusing the workplace?

Lauren Rottet, FAIA, FIIDA, founding principal, Rottet Studio (LR): It's important to understand the drivers of this trend in order to predict where it will go – the worst thing we can do is react to a trend and make designs that become quickly obsolete. None of the trends of the past three decades have had to do with the human aspect. They were all for the employer to be more efficient with space and cost. This recent trend of hospitality in the workplace is about the employee, and we thank the millennials for making us realize that we're not just worker bees.

SSS: We need to understand the trajectory of human involvement. Dancie, you have clients who are both creating the market and responding to it. Why are their particular stories interesting in relation to the humanization of the workplace?



Johnson/Downie, Houston, TX.

Dancie Ware, CEO, Dancie Perugini Ware Public Relations (DW): Our industry is going through a complete transformation. We have a variety of consumer-based clients. When our client, HEB, moved to Houston, for example, they wanted to understand who their consumers were before opening their doors. It wasn't just about grocery shoppers, but about experiential shopping and a broad sense of community.

SSS: In the built environment, it's not as simple as convenience – we need to design for the whole system. Chip, as an authentic Houstonite, how does this new market work for you?

Chip Colvill, president & CEO, Colvill Office Properties (CC): I represent a number of developers who market considerable downtown space to a wide variety of office users. With Houston's range of new and historic properties, we try to understand tenant preference and how to market a building's specific assets.

Twenty years ago, Houston was an oil town and an energy capital of the world. As tenants come to Houston to benefit from its opportunities as a world presence, we've seen a tremendous shift in tenant type and spectrum of technological capabilities. We rely on architects to keep our clients educated on current trends, with an eye on where those trends might be decades from now. And we try to reposition existing buildings to keep them relevant.

SSS: People want to be nearer to services, their homes, and walkable areas. The buildings themselves have to function differently and provide space for people to fluidly communicate. How are you responding to that trend?

CC: You need foresight and creativity to work from the bones of older buildings. It's ultimately about involving consultants who can really figure out the benefits of the property and understand the owner's perspective, the bones, and the assets.



Paul Hastings, LLP, Chicago, IL.

SSS: Kevin, you spent time in Paris and worked for Ricardo Bofill. Now, as a residential property developer, you're translating your experience for Houston.

Kevin Batchelor, senior managing director, Hines (KB): I'm from Fort Worth, Texas, but had no idea what growing up in the suburbs really meant until I spent eight years in Paris and New York. When I would visit my parents, I'd suddenly be back in a space with no connectivity.

It occurred to me that we were designing objective office buildings – like perfume bottles that you could place on top of a counter – that didn't connect to the ground plane. I began to think about the horizontal plane instead of the vertical plane. We're now seeing a clear pattern of more valuable projects and longer sustainability when we invest in quality and connectivity. And I think office development is actually behind residential development in terms of this trend.

SSS: What do you do in your developments to activate the ground floors and keep work places accessible?



Seyfarth Shaw LLP, Houston, TX.

KB: Our most recent high-rise has 15 thousand square feet of program space at the ground levels. In terms of live/work space, we're seeing a demographic shift from renter-of-necessity to renter-by-choice. And the renters are a very diverse mix of people, many of whom work remotely. As a result, we're catering our facilities to comfort-working environments in which you can take your laptop and sit in multiple places, conducting business out of your apartment. We're also introducing retail in mixed-use space. In our downtown Market Square project, for instance, we made the project smaller and denser, created a pocket for restaurants and retail, and consciously connected to green space.

SSS: There are so many different ways to do business and work now than there were before. Jacob, you've brought many interesting ideas from your travels to the high-end market.

Jacob Sudhoff, Jacob Sudhoff, CEO, Sudhoff Companies (JS): Our goal at Sudhoff Companies is to take products, design, and details that we see while traveling the world and infuse them into what Houstonians want to have in their homes. Recently in Milan, for example, we saw a new European trend of on/off kitchens. Especially in more efficient spaces where you're scaling down, you can close up your kitchen and entertain without having your dishes and appliances out in the middle of everything. We're bringing those types of ideas back to Houston in our new buildings.

Houstonians are highly sophisticated and want to live differently. Most of our buyers come from a one-mile radius of our condominiums and they want amenities but don't want to have to maintain them. Often, our buyers are empty-nesters who want to live close to restaurants, museums, retail, and work. It's about quality of life.

SSS: Dancie, you bring something very important to Houston. You come from Galveston, a historic town where the way of building, such as the use of porches and positioning of windows, reflects an understanding of the environment. What can Houston learn from Galveston?

DW: As Houston is being renovated, restored, and transformed, the importance of the community experience certainly has spread across the causeway from Galveston. The Heights, for example, has a number of neighborhoods with the opportunity to face your neighbor in a shared alleyway, or to share a driveway and a green space. We see lessons about shared community in how the workplace is expanding, too. For historic cities, typically, that experience was just part of the make-up.

SSS: We're trying to connect more to our environment and be outside more in our cities. How does underground Houston play into this new way of thinking about the seamlessness of human life?

KB: My first experience arriving in Houston after a decade in graduate school was in the heat of September, being directed to the tunnels for a place to eat. Fast forward to 2017: Critical mass of infill development on the residential side has created a huge demand for restaurants, retail, and commercial activity. You also have a healthy amount of office spaces downtown. With the parks and the areas that are being redeveloped, Houston in five years will be unrecognizable.



Haynes and Boone, LLP, Houston, TX

SSS: Houston looks like every other American city. How does Houston begin to look like Houston?

CC: In the years ahead we're going to have a greater identity. We have a dynamic hotel industry, with twenty boutique hotels being built in downtown Houston. And, with the overall re-urbanization of the city, we're seeing the redevelopment of some parts of town and the development of mixed-use projects. Instead of urban sprawl and office buildings, we are now thinking about where people live, work, and play.

LR: Our physical environment is trying to catch up with our people. Houston is an amazingly social, gracious, and hospitable city. People come and don't want to leave.

JS: In predicting how Houston will look in the future, we have to consider the effect of land prices. For the longest time, land prices in Houston were so low that we could afford to build low-rise buildings. Today, that dirt is no longer inexpensive, so we have to go vertical. Land prices alone can dictate what we build.

SSS: Trends in hospitality are humanizing the workspace. Lauren, tell us how the human experience is changing.

LR: People want a collection of experiences. Combining the pool level of a hotel with a mobile workspace, for example, can be an icebreaker to socializing. In the office environment, you can use panels to instantly switch from a conference room to a break room, from an office environment to a social environment.

JS: Our recent travels to Italy gave us a sense of hospitality and service that we are emulating in Houston. The more we can be inspired by places around the world, the more success we will achieve.

LR: Working and socializing used to be exclusive. But you don't have to be stuck in your cubicle to work. People now realize that you actually might be more productive if you're having a little bit of fun and socializing as you work.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: With rents as high as they are, how do you justify a small retail operators going into the first floor of a new high rise?

KB: Simply, I can't afford not to. I have to have the café and the restaurant or I'm not competitive. So, we create a park, put a restaurant on it, and expect zero income from that space. Every vertical building needs an activated base. You essentially have to take everything that makes a great city – plazas, connectivity, cafés – and do it in each project. Even if you get no income for it, it helps to enhance your resident experience. Every building has an obligation to contribute to the grander urban planning concept.

JS: We can allocate costs among components in a mixed-use development so that the retail shop can afford their space, since their presence is an added bonus, and the condo can pay more.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: With all of this development, what do you see happening with public transportation?

CC: Houston is behind on mass transit. Aside from downtown, which is largely reliant on mass transit, Houston is a car city. But, from what I've seen, light rail connectivity between downtown and midtown areas is bound to boom.

DW: Politics is the problem. Until we change the mindset and have more advocates pushing for better transportation, it isn't going to change.

KB: I don't think you're going to see mass transit in Houston from the political ranks because it's too gummed up. Instead, it's going to be a combination of grass roots and mavericks that come together.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How are you infusing art, culture, and socially provocative topics in your developments?

KB: We're currently doing a joint venture with a local boutique hotel, La Colombe D'or, whose owner is an art collector. We're expanding the hotel into the base of the building and incorporating his art gallery into our project. So, residents share hotel services, the hotel shares residential amenity services, and the collaborative fabric of art and culture runs through the project.

The future is about activating our land in thoughtful, intelligent manner. There is collaboration at every level, from market-rate developers to the highest-end developers to the people from art museums driving culture.

JS: We have a unique new project in Houston, called **Giorgetti** Houston. **Giorgetti**, the oldest Italian furniture company, is designing every interior element in the building. So each home is actually a piece of art.

SSS: The conversation has become more involved. There is a huge shift in the marketplace, with hospitality infusing workplace design. But, without development, without what it looks like and feels like on the street, we can't talk about one or the other. It's all tied together.



Szenasy (center) leads the panel in discussion.

Photo © Maksim Koloskov.

Panelists:

- Kevin Batchelor, Senior Managing Director, Hines*
- Chip Colvill, President & CEO, Colvill Office Properties*
- Lauren Rottet, FAIA, FIIDA, Founding Principal, Rottet Studio*
- Jacob Sudhoff, CEO, Sudhoff Companies*
- Dancie Ware, CEO, Dancie Perugini Ware Public Relations*

Moderator:

Susan S. Szenasy, director of design innovation, Metropolis magazine

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