

What if the future office isn't an office at all?

18/07/2023 Lauren Grace Morris



Amsterdam's DB55 isn't your normal office. In fact, to its owners – creative studio D/DOCK – it's not an office at all. The 'blended' venue represents a major shift in what workspace can be for its users and communities.

If DB55 was the setting for a choose-your-own-adventure scenario, one wouldn't be disappointed by the potential circumstances. The porous non-office is D/DOCK's HQ, but as that label might suggest, there's a lot of other things going on besides computer work and meetings. There's a lively restaurant space – easily transformed into an event venue – upon entry. An intern once had a five-day stay, in one of the plush upholstered meeting cabins, while waiting to secure an apartment. Art director – and budding apiculturist – Riccardo Bortolotto cares for bee colonies outside. And designers can make a pit stop at DB55's health club after visiting its generously equipped material library. New faces are a constant, since co-working and spontaneous meetings with external companies and individuals is encouraged.

It's all an exercise in 'blending' space, according to D/DOCK founder and creative director Francesco Messori and director and partner Thomas van Leeuwen. Agile at its core, the building can be adapted – and updated – as needed.

What prompted your team to bring DB55 to life?

THOMAS VAN LEEUWEN: We decided on moving to a new office, initially triggered by a rental increase. But we started thinking that an office might not fit any longer with our company vision and mission. So we had a sit-down meeting in Museumplein with all of our colleagues and asked everyone to visualize their ideal office, without any boundaries. It was quite interesting that almost 90 per cent of it was overlapping. Everybody basically agreed on that it should be somewhere you could go to not only for work – somewhere connected to nature that you could easily walk in and out of. We said it should be friendly, very hospitality driven and designed in a circular way. We came to this building, and it sort of felt right from the start.





A 'blank canvas' space for work and much more, DB55 is located in Amsterdam's Houthavens area.

In hindsight, everything makes sense, right? We were designing a lot of offices and hotels. What was always striking to see was that when you came into these offices, they were always completely empty after five o'clock. And they also began to look the same as hotel lobbies. Hotels are much more used to work now – we see many more laptops in lobbies. So we started to think about how we could use buildings more efficiently by giving them a second, third or even fourth user when primary users don't need them. We really started going for the whole idea after the COVID lockdowns ended – basically overloading DB55 with events and all kinds of installations, restaurant nights, concerts, those kinds of things.

Why do you think flexibility is so important?

FM: The periphery is, in our opinion, a very powerful place, because it's not defined. The 'in between' is kind of free land to conquer, give your own meaning and use in the way you want. But there are structural elements that can provide a certain trigger for interaction. That's what we try to do here. What's nice about this display – when you don't have any other finishings – is that it's very easy to take down, change and move.

To design an office for specific individuals and needs is very difficult. Can the office do that? We don't know. So you may have to produce different kinds of environments that can be used in different ways – like production areas, leisure zones and clubhouses, where you can spend off-time and socialize.

The project started before the pandemic. How did the crisis influence your thinking about the space?

TVL: Francesco once gave an interview with the beautiful saying that we're not machines. The office, for many, is a place where you're handcuffed to your desk to produce stuff from nine to five in exchange for a salary to pay off your bills and mortgage. That's the old way, I think. It's interesting that, pre-pandemic, a lot of people thought that was ridiculous: an office needs desks, you go to the office to work and this is how life is. But then, because of the pandemic, it totally shifted. I think it would have shifted anyway, but it would have taken decades.





D/DOCK partners with other companies and organizations to keep the space active with new programming and users.

FM: Once you break the physical presence between people, you need to reconnect them. This is one of the biggest challenges now that companies are considering – how you can retain the cohesion and the interaction between community. It's one of the reasons we are developing this idea of 'blending': one of the most important elements of connection is to inhabit a place instead of just using a place. That means that you eat together, you have rituals together, you have your children, your parents pass by, etc. So work becomes an element of the full-life experience of community.

Pre-pandemic, offices and campuses that provided a range of amenities and benefits were often criticized for being exploitative tools to get people working for longer. How can companies move away from this dynamic?

TVL: Of course employers have an incentive for people to want to come to the office. But when I started as a partner at D/DOCK it really struck me how much easier it is to spend corporate money than your

own. One euro business-wise is not the same as one private euro. You can make so much happen with corporate money. I think it's a powerful thing that you can utilize the office for personal benefit. For us, as a company, it's a lot of fun: it gives a feeling of reward and motivation to give all the business resources we have to people.



Employees are encouraged to use the space to pursue their professional ambitions as well as their personal interests.

FM: We need to start to create a system in which your effort is no longer based on the monetary system. Almost a decade ago we came up with this concept of a business community – where a company with financial muscle is capable of supporting the community around it. That can mean the community of employees or a company's local community. So not to have a company just sit in a location or building, make a profit and go away with that. Instead, you have a company that enables and interacts with employees in order to create a supportive system. We strongly believe in this – it's the reason why this building, for us, is a sort of experimental prototype for creating a new system of social dwellings based on blending. We try to create places where you can thrive.

TVL: The office then becomes a way to actually help other people.

It's so interesting to think about how offices can fill the gap in areas that are lacking.

What challenges come with developing blended venues?

TVL: There are three major things to overcome. One is owning the owner structure – legal ownership offices and other functionalities don't always match. The second is what zoning plan you're in. And the

third is technical side of things. Still, if the problem comes big enough, as they say: under pressure, everything becomes liquid. And I think when the problem becomes big enough, then things will happen.



The space can be used after-hours for everything from events to temporary lodging.

The most important part is the psychological change. The technical, financial and legal stuff. . .that's a walk in the park, really. Stop thinking about what could go wrong – start thinking about what could go right and take it from there. Otherwise you won't initiate anything.

How do you see this idea evolving?

FM: The majority of big companies are based on the fact that someone owns the power of work and employees are expendable. Since the 1980s, we've been raised on the idea of our career: to hop from one job to another, make more and more money and disregard the things around you. People need to think in a different way. We need to build up different models. And then we can talk about what the future of the office is.