

Home Work

Words by John Williams

Up until a few months ago, the concept of working from home was either a fantasy or an impossibility for most of us. Now, with some planning and forethought, it can be a reality.

During the lockdown, most of us had plenty of time to experience, first-hand, the pleasure and pain of working from home. Given the speed at which our enforced isolation occurred, there was little time to think about how or where we would conduct our nine to five routine, resulting in less-than-ideal home office set-ups for many.

That said, as offices around the city slowly re-open and we gradually return to our desks, many of us are already looking back at those few surreal weeks with fond memories and wondering 'with more thought and a better set-up, what if...'. Working from home has opened up possibilities of a better work-life balance as well as increased efficiency and productivity.

With this in mind, we approached a handful of local architects and asked them about their thoughts on designs for a home office, plus any personal anecdotes of their experiences of working at home during the lockdown and beyond.

Jonathan Smith, Matter Architects



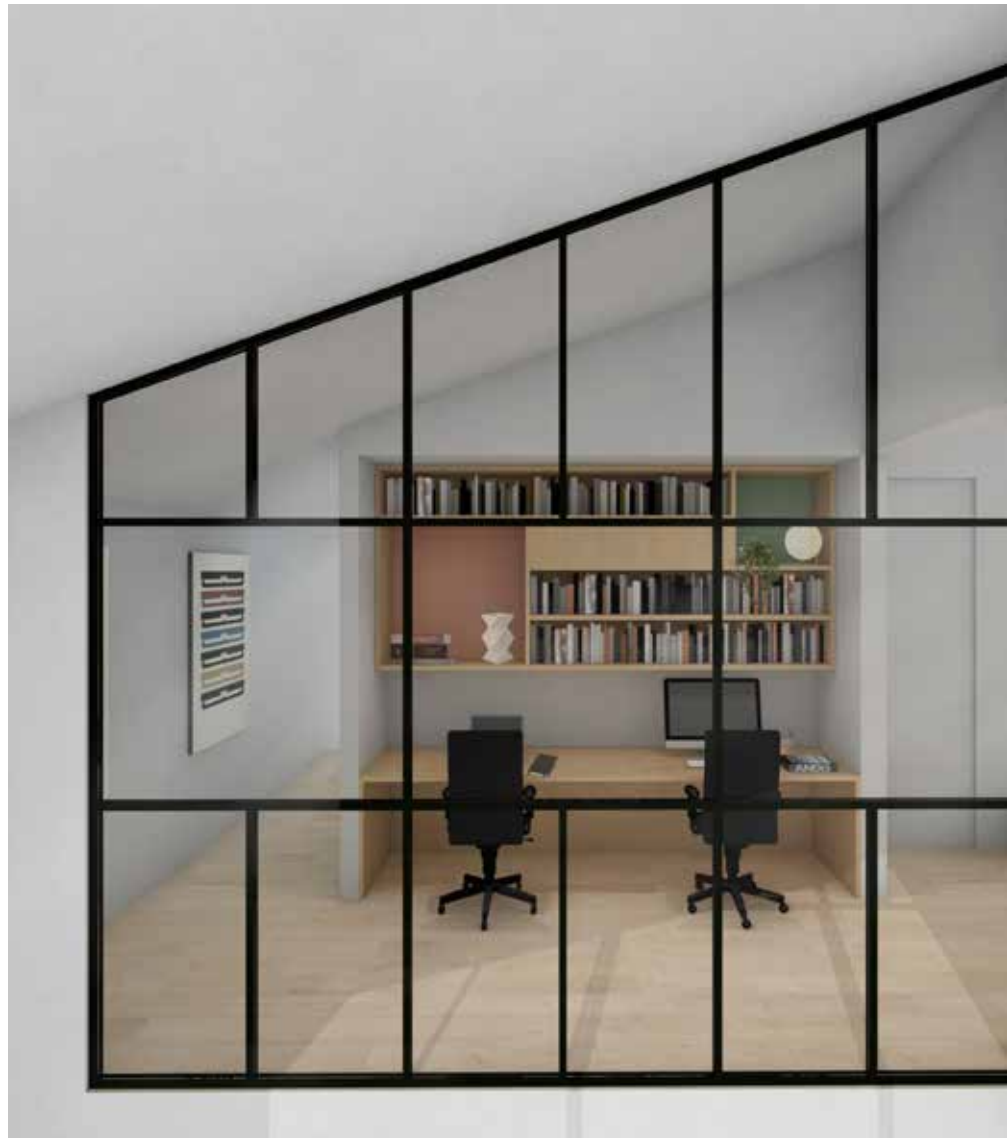
Context is a beautiful and formative part of the design process. One person's hallway may be another person's home office, so expectations and discussions around these should be a priority from inception. Understanding the way a client and their family live and work gives us insight to establish the typology and quality of space required – whether a home office should be separate or part of the living area(s), fixed or flexible, open or soundproof.

The lockdown saw many people experience living and working together in unplanned scenarios, a process that led to reflection and consideration. We observed a large proportion of the country's workforce, for the most part, enjoying being at home, which is understandable given the reduction in commutes, pleasure in the home comforts of food and amenities, and proximity to family

or friends. Perhaps there needs to be a compromise between 'home offices' and 'office homes'. Certain practicalities about the way people work also need to filter through. Some crave a community environment full of noise and energy; others seek separation from distraction and stimulus.

Depending on what is required, we believe flexibility is helpful when approaching home offices – we look at areas such as bedrooms that may be empty for the majority of the day, also parts of the home that may be partitioned in a considered manner when required, or by using colour, lighting and/or furniture to define space usage within open-plan areas.

Maximising efficiency is also important. In a recent alteration project, we reconfigured the roof space within an existing



villa and installed a stacking carpark. Initially used as a double garage, it is likely to become a home office in future. This approach provides long-term flexibility and maximises the useable floor area of the home.

At Matter, we are currently involved in designing an artist's home, plus a studio/office, with the specific brief of separation; the small physical walk between structures provides a head-space break for the artist. In a previous project, we created separation between a home and a physiotherapy practice with the addition of a second level in an existing villa. These examples both involve large scopes of work for specific home offices. A smaller project saw us create a doctor's home office utilising additional space in a double-width hallway by using flush partitions. Workspaces aren't all about the adults in the household - young ones need space to work, too. Younger children seem able to turn a tidy pile of stuff into a planet of mess... they are also world leaders at living in the moment. There is a magic to the way children occupy space; the areas adults tend to ignore seem to be their favourites - small, low or high, cosy, hidden, even a cardboard box, so scale and connection should be considered for kids' workspaces.

For older children, larger bedrooms with studies can be helpful as independence kicks in. However, connection

remains paramount. We have previously designed a home office in a collaborative process, empowering the children to help create the space, ensuring it suits and is used by the entire family.

The key to storage is to work through what needs to be handy, versus what can be stored away elsewhere. Often, we don't actually need as much storage as we think. Maximising space through floor-to-ceiling shelving is helpful. If you really want to keep those old papers from 12 years ago, put them into boxes, label them well, and store them on the highest shelves. Make a diary of the objects and stationery you use over a week - these are the elements you need to design for first - and then build around these proximal elements in an ever-increasing radius.

Flexibility is also important - being able to make bookshelves taller or shorter, wider or narrower, so that space is maximised and fit for purpose.

Depending on where the office is in the home, being able to shut off storage may be important. We've previously designed a 'moving office' to be used in shared spaces - it's a large cabinet set on wheels with horizontal, opaque roller doors. It was important to be able to close off the storage, both aesthetically and for security, which can be relevant for home offices, too. It's also important to metaphorically shut the office door when you finish for the day.

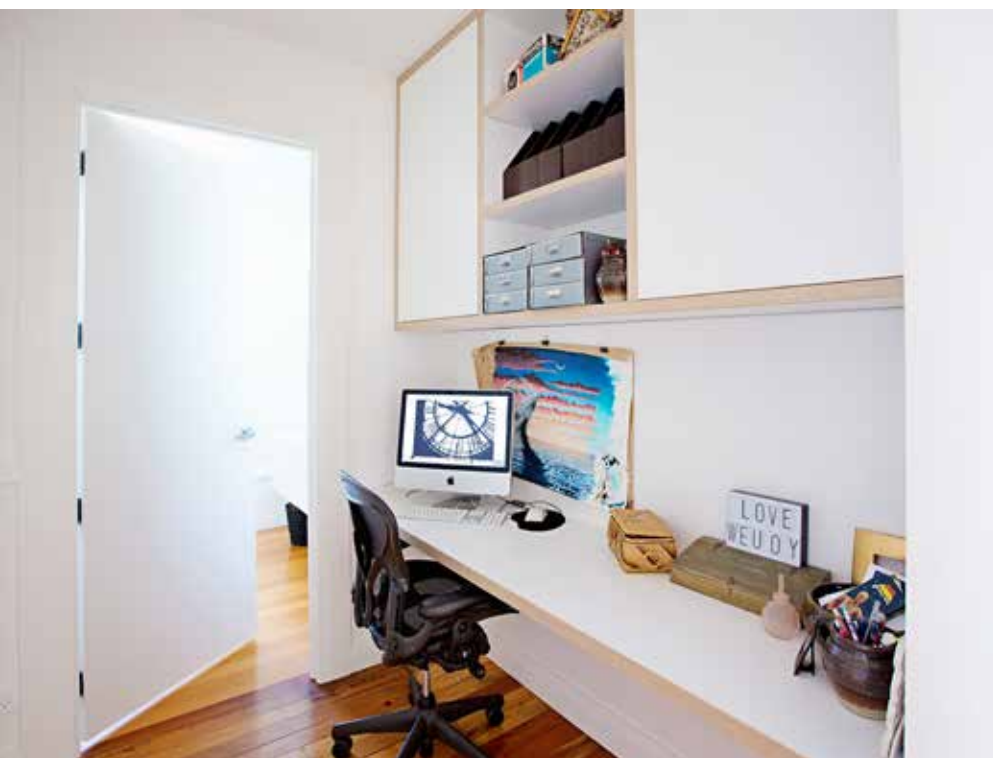
Recent changes to consenting processes now allow for stand-alone structures up to 30m² to be built without council processing costs. This freedom presents some exciting possibilities and options where people have the space to build new structures. Bear in mind, though, while consenting costs will be saved, all other building code requirements remain.

Ben Lloyd, Lloyd Hartley Architects



Like any project, the design of a home office needs to start with a brief. Every client will have specific requirements, spatial considerations and family dynamics. As architects, we need to know who we're designing for and what they want to achieve. For instance, a dedicated home office to be used by two people for 40 hours a week will need a completely different design response to a home office for someone to use for a couple of hours each evening. Other important factors to understand are how the home office is to engage with the rest of the house, if there are any IT infrastructure requirements, and just how much space is required.

Given what many of us have experienced over the past few months - being forced to work from home - we have probably understood the difficulties of trying to conduct a serious work call from a temporary office space within a living room or bedroom. So, when it comes to temporary versus dedicated home office spaces, as long as everyone understands the limitations of temporary spaces, we can make



them work. The downside is that sometimes a temporary space will compromise the existing space too much, and provide a less-than-optimal space to work in. If flexibility of use is an option, then repurposing an existing bedroom or living room, or incorporating a home office into a piece of bespoke furniture that can be closed down when not in use, are all viable possibilities.

Ideally, storage will be as minimal and paperless as possible but, in reality, this is almost impossible to achieve. As part of the original project brief, understanding the extent of storage required allows it to be part of the design from the outset. Having the ability to close off the home office from the house, or to at least hide the clutter if it is part of a shared space, is important, if only to be able to visually remove 'work' from 'home' when it's not required.

It is also important for us, as designers, to know about any existing furniture that needs to be incorporated in a home office, and for the homeowner to understand the limitations of the designed space before purchasing any new furniture or equipment.

Good lighting is essential. As such, we work with specialist lighting consultants to ensure an optimal outcome. Ideally, though, some natural light (and ventilation)

should be incorporated into a home office space, as well as specific task lighting. Another important factor to take into consideration, to reduce eyestrain and provide a more interesting outlook or view, is to have a window to the exterior. This becomes crucial if you're setting up a more permanent home office.

Evelyn McNamara, EMA



If you have a spare bedroom that can be converted into a home office, I think this is the ideal scenario. A dedicated space is really important, as the idea of setting up a temporary desk before starting work and packing it all away again every day can become a little draining. Also, you're probably going to be more

inclined to leave the office 'set up' to save the hassle of packing it away each day... and this can lead to your mind not switching off from work. It's hard to change your focus at the end of the day if your computer and files are still in front of you on the dining table!

However, not everyone has an entire room to spare, nor does everyone need a full-time home office. If you are simply working from home on the odd occasion, I think all you need is a dedicated area so you can get in the work 'zone' – and a good desk. I recently purchased a 900mm-wide, adjustable-height, foldaway plywood desk, made by local company Work From Home Desks. The great thing about these desks is that they are fully height-adjustable, so you can choose to be sitting or standing. Also, they can be flat-packed away and re-assembled easily without any screws or fixings. We leave ours assembled and set up, tucked behind the door of a spare bedroom. The great thing is, if we decide we want to move the desk, or need the space for guests to stay, we can easily pack it away and slide it under the bed.

These desks also make an ideal set-up for children, providing a designated area where they can focus on their homework or projects they are working on.

Personally, I don't need too much in the way of storage, as I have moved to an almost paperless office. I use my iPad for everything. There is a great free app called Penultimate that allows you to write notes, create notebooks, and make free-hand sketches, etc. If I need hard copy documents, I use an old-fashioned Eastlite cardboard folder.

We are in the midst of replacing our old Skyline garage at home, like for like, and we don't need a new consent as it had no plumbing fittings and electrical is existing. To futureproof it as a 'flexi space', we are having wall studs at 600mm centres and trusses at 900mm centres, close enough together that if we want to insulate and gib the garage at a later stage, we can. That way it could be used as a home office if desired. Also, the floor needs to be 150mm above the driveway level to comply as a habitable space.



Tim Dorrington, Dorrington Atcheson Architects



You don't need a massive amount of space for a home office – something tucked away in a cupboard with sliding doors to hide the mess is a great option. Another good option is a room that doubles as something else, so you are not wasting a whole room. Foldaway Murphy beds are a great way to make an office double as a guest room.

That said, a dedicated space is much preferable to a temporary space. Having worked from home in the past, the act of leaving the 'house' and moving to the 'office' definitely gives you the sense that you have come to work. Sitting next to washing that needs hanging out and dishes that need cleaning is a distraction. To ensure productivity you really need a dedicated space.

For the kids, a dedicated space is preferable, also. Luckily, we had re-done our kids' rooms as their Christmas presents, so they both now have their 'grown up' rooms suitable for teenagers. These include queen-size beds and a desk and chair set-up. Though they would both prefer to lounge around in comfort on their beds, the desks now mean they have a designated space to do their home schooling, which includes Zoom calls requiring privacy.

The fact that all four of us essentially had our own separate work spaces during the lockdown – mine downstairs doubles as the guest bedroom with a Murphy bed, my wife Emma-Jane was upstairs in a cupboard, and the kids were set up in their rooms

– made that period much easier to deal with than if we all been in our open-plan living/dining/kitchen space trying to work, do schoolwork, and participate in online calls. Technology is one thing, but you need the space to be able to make the most of it.

Sam Atcheson, Dorrington Atcheson Architects

Most of the houses we design have a home office of some sort. These vary from a desk or an alcove in a bigger space (or hallway) to stand-alone buildings, which house whole businesses.

The size and position of the office will depend on what the office is used for and how often it is to be used. If the use is more family oriented, then the position is likely to be in more of the social part of the house. If the office is for full-time use, then a bit of separation works better. Sometimes there's a public-facing requirement for an office space, such as when a business is being run from home. In this instance, separate access is a requirement.

Pre-lockdown, we were already working on several projects that incorporated larger-scale offices in the backyard. With the way technology has accommodated more flexible working arrangements – and the lockdown has opened people's eyes to other working models – I would anticipate that we will see more of these projects in the future.

A point in case is a project we're currently working on for clients who both have their own businesses, and want a dedicated office built in the front of their house. They have already done one renovation with us so this is phase two, and it will provide a master bedroom suite, office space and meeting room.

CHAIRS OF CHOICE

Ben Lloyd

In our studio and within my home office, we use the Life Chair by Formway Design.

Jonathan Smith

Standing desks provide health benefits and use minimal space, but if seating is requested, we love the Herman Miller Aeron office chair.

Tim Dorrington

I also use a Herman Miller Aeron Chair, but am interested in trying out a Noho Move chair, made here in New Zealand from up-cycled waste plastic such as reclaimed fishing nets and end-of-use carpets.

Evelyn McNamara

It is critical that you have a chair that offers good support, as you can do yourself serious injury using the wrong chair. I recently purchased a Herman Miller Setu Lyris, and it is incredible.

