INDUSTRY REPORT

What London Tells Us About the Office of Tomorrow

Macro trends, real-world case studies and actionable insights.
Strategic analysis of the Workspace Design Show London 2026.

Report produced by Maxime Cousin for Osol · osol.co · February 2026

CONFIDENTIAL

VENUE
Business Design Centre, London

DATES
25–26 February 2026

EDITION
Connecting Realities

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SECTION A · FRAMING

Context and Positioning

The Workspace Design Show London 2026 took place on 25 and 26 February at the Business Design Centre in Islington. Theme of this edition: **"Connecting Realities"**. Over two days, more than fifty experts took the stage. Architects, real estate directors, workplace heads at multinationals, strategy consultants, AI specialists. All there to debate the future of the office.

WDS London has established itself as one of the densest events on the European workplace calendar. It is not the largest trade show in the sector, but it is probably the one with the highest concentration of operational decision-makers per square metre. You are just as likely to bump into a bank's head of real estate as the founder of a design studio. Hallway conversations matter as much as keynotes. And strategic signals often emerge in the gaps — between panels, during coffee breaks.

This 2026 edition arrives at a pivotal moment for the sector. AI is accelerating: most attendees already use it daily or weekly (show of hands during the "From artificial to real intelligence" session). Hybrid models are stabilising, with occupancy patterns becoming predictable (peak on Tuesdays, trough on Fridays, 30% weekly average). Real estate investment is bouncing back on the premium segment, with London rents predicted to reach £200/sq ft. And employee expectations have never been clearer: an office that earns the commute, or nothing.

At the same time, new tensions are emerging. Artificial intelligence threatens the junior recruitment pipeline. The bifurcation of the real estate market creates stranded-asset risk. The cost of embedded intelligence in fit-outs doubles every five years. And real estate increasingly reports to HR rather than finance, fundamentally changing decision-making criteria.

This report is not a conference summary. It is a cross-cutting strategic analysis. We cross-referenced the eleven sessions we attended to extract weak signals, convergences, contradictions, and above all actionable insights. We do not transcribe what speakers said. We analyse what it means for European workplace decision-makers.

It is aimed at professionals who design, manage or decide the future of workspaces in Europe. Workplace Directors and Heads of Work Environment. Facility Managers. CIOs and IT Workplace Managers involved in transformation projects. Real Estate Directors and Corporate Real Estate. Interior architects, consultants and design studios. And CHROs who are increasingly taking charge of spatial strategy.

Methodology: 11 sessions attended in full. Cross-analysis of presentations. Systematic extraction of data, quotes and actionable frameworks. Contextualised against European market trends. The report is structured in two parts: a cross-cutting analysis of 7 mega-trends (Section B) that connects sessions to one another, and session-by-session recaps (Section C) for those who want to dig into a specific talk.

WHY OSOL PUBLISHES THIS REPORT

This report is produced by Maxime Cousin, CEO and co-founder of Osol. It is part of an ongoing series of publications stemming from learning expeditions, international trade shows, industry conferences and day-to-day exchanges with Osol's 120+ clients across 15 countries.

Consulting is not Osol's business. Our product is electrical flexibility for workspaces. But we believe our mission goes beyond technology. Making life simpler for our users, clients and partners also means sharing knowledge. This content curation is part of that effort: gathering experiences and learnings from across the ecosystem to help everyone converge towards the best possible workspaces.

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- **Reading time:** ~20 minutes · 7 trends · 11 sessions decoded · 10 actionable steps

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Executive Summary

WDS London 2026 reveals a paradigm shift. The office is no longer a standardised container — it is becoming an intentional platform: cultural, technological, community-driven. But this transformation demands new rigour in data, change management, inclusion and technology integration. The consensus is clear: the organisations that succeed are those that start with strategy, not the floor plan. And those that protect their commitments all the way to delivery, rather than sacrificing them at the first budget review.

The show outlines an industry in acceleration. AI is moving from talk to operations, with concrete use cases in space planning, procurement and ticket management. Premium real estate is bouncing back strongly in London, but the market is bifurcating dangerously between Grade A assets and obsolescent stock. Hybrid models are stabilising around predictable patterns (Tuesday peak, Friday trough, 30% average). And community is emerging as a measurable strategic lever, not a cultural bonus.

1 **The generic office is dead.** The office must now "earn attendance": prove its value to every employee against the competition of home. Transactional work migrates home. The office refocuses on three activities that remote work cannot deliver: informal learning through osmosis, complex high-stakes emotional collaboration, and culture-building through shared presence. The desk is making a comeback — but reinvented, aesthetic and ergonomic.

2 **AI is transforming the entire workplace value chain,** from space planning to procurement. The gains are real (72,000 hours saved at ServiceNow, stacking plans in seconds via HRIS integration). But its limits are precise: iterative degradation of outputs, lack of taste, ignorance of local regulations (the Germany error: 30,000 vs 65,000 sq ft). The real competitive advantage remains human curation. AI should be used to converge, not to multiply options.

3 **Traditional KPIs are no longer enough.** The emergence of "soft KPIs" (belonging, interaction quality, happiness, intent to stay) is redefining how space performance is measured. The bridge to the CFO runs through turnover cost. Triangulation (sensors + ethnography + surveys) is the only reliable methodology. A JLL project measured a 60% reduction in internal emails after moving to activity-based working.

4 **Change management must come before design, not after.** Enablement replaces compliance: giving people the confidence and psychological safety to embrace change. Visible leaders and on-the-ground change champions are the two most powerful levers. Indecision is identified as a greater risk than a bad decision. The "Day 1 / Day 2 / Day 3" approach (deliver fundamentals, then iterate) is gaining ground.

5 **Inclusion has become an industrial process.** From deep user profiling (28-30 profiles mapped from waking to sleeping) to the "guardian of the brief" who protects commitments against value engineering. Inclusive improvements cost little when anticipated (a USB-C cable, a wall in the right colour, a refuge space). They cost a lot when retrofitted. Volunteer-based testing is a trap: the profiles most in need of inclusion never volunteer.

6 **Community is a strategic infrastructure,** with public health data that reframes the stakes (2x mortality risk without community ties, ~15 years of reduced life expectancy from chronic loneliness). The three-layer model (local-physical, functional cohorts, cross-border groups) is the most actionable framework. Daily micro-rituals build more trust than large formal programmes.

7 **The building is entering its "OS moment".** Open APIs, embedded ML, plug-in ecosystems. The cost of technical intelligence in fit-outs has doubled in five years and will double again. But the real bottleneck remains integration: companies operate around 70 applications and 10 core systems that do not talk to each other. The building-as-a-platform business model is still under construction, with open questions around licensing and revenue sharing between landlord and occupier.

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QUOTE

"Something wonderful happened to the office, because we became super critical about it, and we tried to actually get rid of everything we don't like."

Kasper Swartz, Founder, KSA (Kasper Swartz Architects)

SECTION B · STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

7 Mega-Trends in Workplace

What WDS London 2026 reveals about where the industry is heading

TREND 1

The Generic Office Is Dead. The Intentional Office Takes Over.

If there is one absolute consensus running through all eleven sessions at WDS London 2026, it is this: the standardised open-plan office, with its rows of identical desks, glass meeting rooms and a foosball table as a proxy for "culture", is over.

But the office itself is not dead. It is reinventing itself. And that is the crucial nuance.

> *"The office is dead. Long live the office."*
>
> Director, DMFK Architects

What is dying is the default office — the one you go to because you have to. What is emerging is an office that must earn presence. Several speakers use the term **"earn attendance"**: the office must prove its value every day, against the competition of home, the café, the coworking space.

Tomorrow's office is built around what remote work cannot deliver. The panellists identify three categories of activities that still justify the physical commute:

- **Informal learning through osmosis**: the junior watching the senior negotiate a contract
- **Complex, high-stakes emotional collaboration**: resolving a conflict, co-creating under pressure
- **Culture-building through shared presence**

Kasper Swartz (KSA) describes a radical process: every square metre that does not create intentional value is eliminated. The result: smaller spaces, but denser in quality interactions.

> *"Something wonderful happened to the office, because we became super critical about it."*
>
> Kasper Swartz, KSA

Acoustics: the invisible parameter that became priority #1

The gap between spaces provided and spaces actually used is "quite wide" according to Steve Gale. Collaborative areas sitting empty, meeting rooms monopolised by solo users. The recurring culprit: acoustics. One speaker half-jokingly suggests renaming the show **"The Acoustic Design Show"**.

Acoustics is the most critical parameter of the hybrid office because it directly determines the ability to make calls, concentrate, and collaborate without friction. And it is the parameter most frequently neglected in design.

The "democratized design" trap

Harry McKinley (Mixed Interiors) opens a nuanced debate. "Democratized design" — involving users in design choices — is a powerful engagement lever. But poorly framed, it produces the **"Homer Simpson car"**: a result that satisfies everyone on paper and works for no one in practice.

Steve Gale goes further by calling for a ban on the term "ABW" (Activity-Based Working). Now a marketing catch-all, the concept actually prevents clear thinking. You need to name precisely what you are doing, not hide behind a hollow acronym.

→ KEY TAKEAWAY

Before any project, audit the real gap between spaces provided and spaces actually used. Acoustics is your #1 priority. And name your work model precisely: "ABW" is no longer an operational concept.

TREND 2

AI is transforming the entire value chain, from brief to building.

Three WDS 2026 sessions address AI from the angle of measurable operational impact. The picture is nuanced: AI accelerates certain tasks, but its limitations are precise and poorly understood by the market.

Where AI is already a game-changer

The most striking example comes from ServiceNow: **72,000 hours saved** through workflow automation. It's the most tangible ROI presented at the show. In space planning, AI now enables floor stacking in seconds via HRIS integration — a task that previously took weeks.

> *"When the rubber hits the road… people get found out quite quickly."*
> Lewis Barker, ServiceNow

Owners accelerate, architects follow

On the real estate side, owners already use AI to test feasibility before engaging an architect. The decision point shifts upstream in the process. In London, where premiums reach **£200/sq ft** (the world's most expensive city for office construction), every poorly optimised square metre costs a fortune.

Some clients now require up to **60 pages of legal terms** on AI in their tenders. HDR is building its own internal model.

The limits nobody wants to see

The session "From Artificial to Real Intelligence" offers the most clear-eyed assessment. AI excels at well-defined tasks with clean data. It degrades as soon as contextual reasoning or multi-system integration is required.

The most telling case: in Germany, **30,000 sq ft estimated by AI versus 65,000 actually required.** The AI ignored local fire safety regulations. Local human validation remains non-negotiable.

Another finding: iterative degradation. Each AI feedback loop produces a more generic result. Taste and cultural sensitivity remain exclusively human.

> *"Data as guide rail, not driver."*
> Session "From Artificial to Real Intelligence"

Sector convergence: the workplace absorbs everything

A strong signal identified by Cristiano Peretti: the boundaries between labs, healthcare, hospitality and workplace are collapsing. NHS robots are migrating to offices. AI accelerates this convergence by making sector-specific solutions transferable.

→ KEY TAKEAWAY

Demand transparency on embedded AI in your tenders. Connect your two core systems (HRIS + booking, or ticketing + analytics). Keep local human validation as non-negotiable.

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Docking stations killed the charger at your desk. Osol kills it everywhere else. Better experience, lower costs, zero works.

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TREND 3

Beyond occupancy: the new workplace KPIs.

Occupancy rate is to the workplace what GDP is to the economy: a convenient but misleading indicator. WDS 2026 marks a tipping point. Traditional KPIs (sqm/person, cost per sqm, fill rate) no longer capture the true value of workspaces.

The "Tuesday peak" problem

JLL presents a comprehensive methodology: sensors + ethnography + scenarios + post-occupancy + humility in the face of results. The key finding: **30% average occupancy, peaking on Tuesdays at 60%+**. Planning on the average means designing for nobody. Planning on the peak means designing for reality.

Octopus Energy breaks the pattern: **60–70% occupancy, with Friday as the busiest day**. Completely against the industry grain. Company culture outweighs macro trends.

> *"We have to be quite humble about what the data tells us."*
> Guzmán Blanco, JLL Design

The emergence of "soft KPIs"

Multiple sessions converge on a new set of metrics: sense of belonging, perceived quality of interactions, workplace Net Promoter Score ("would you recommend your office to a friend?"), and the frequency of unplanned conversations.

Richard Pickering (Cushman & Wakefield) goes further with the attractiveness index: a metric that cross-references occupancy, satisfaction, and performance. The most occupied office isn't the best — it's the one with the best satisfaction-to-occupancy ratio.

From finance to HR: the reporting shift

Nicola Gillen (session "Work is Changing") identifies a structural shift: real estate increasingly reports to HR, no longer to finance. The objectives change: from cost-per-sqm optimisation to employee experience, wellbeing, and retention.

> *"Real estate… now is increasingly reporting to HR."*
> Nicola Gillen

When real estate answers to HR, KPIs become human. Turnover rate, absenteeism, and time-to-hire become legitimate indicators of space quality. As Nicola Gillen notes: HR still thinks too little about the built environment.

The JLL data point: –60% internal emails post-ABW

One JLL figure stands out: **–60% internal emails** after switching to an ABW model. Physical proximity reduces reliance on asynchronous communication. It's a powerful proxy KPI: if your office works well, the inbox empties.

→ KEY TAKEAWAY

Plan for peak occupancy (Tuesday), not the average. Integrate soft KPIs (belonging, satisfaction, workplace NPS) into your dashboards. And ask yourself: does real estate report to the right people in your organisation?

TREND 4

Change management precedes design. Not the other way around.

The session "Transforming How We Work" is the most operationally focused at the show on this topic. Four change management practitioners compare field methodologies: banking, higher education, global design. The consensus is clear: spatial transformation fails when it starts with the floor plan.

Enablement-led change

Jennifer Bryan describes a three-pillar model: **trust, psychological safety, competence**. Enablement replaces compliance. You don't force adoption of a new space — you create the conditions for people to naturally find their place in it.

The most powerful lever: leaders who embody the change. Not corporate emails, not internal newsletters. The physical presence of managers in the new spaces, from day one, using the same unassigned workstations as their teams.

The Imperial College case: 1,400 relocated

Paula Rowntree (Imperial College) presents a large-scale deployment: 1,400 people relocated. The method: open town halls, batching of 156 change requests handled transparently, and a "no surprises" policy.

> *"Curiosity and empathy are probably the number one things."*
> Bex Moorhouse

Bex Moorhouse adds an underexploited dimension: ERGs (Employee Resource Groups). These groups exist in almost every large organisation. Nobody asks them what they need in terms of space. It's the most neglected source of workplace insight.

Refuge spaces under threat

A tension point emerges: protecting quiet spaces and refuge spaces. Moorhouse warns: extroverted leaders systematically want to eliminate them. "Nobody uses them" is the recurring argument. In reality, these are the most critical spaces for introverted, neurodivergent, or stressed individuals.

Protecting these spaces is an ongoing battle that requires usage data and explicit leadership sponsorship.

OSOL PERSPECTIVE

When change management meets power infrastructure

The shift to hot-desking or unassigned seating often fails on an invisible detail: power infrastructure. When sockets are fixed, workstations remain fixed de facto. Osol's experience across 120+ deployments shows that real people mobility follows real energy mobility. Removing cables means removing the last physical anchor preventing change management from working.

→ KEY TAKEAWAY

Before any project, ask your ERGs what they need. It's the most underexploited source of insight. And protect your refuge spaces with usage data, not intuition.

"Do I have my laptop?" That should be the only question.

Not "where's my charger?" Not "is this socket working?"
Not "can I actually work from this room?"

Osol equips workspaces with a badge-tap or app-secured smart battery fleet. Cables, sockets and chargers disappear.

USERS
True work-and-go freedom

WORKPLACE
Spaces that transform without renovation

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No more charger logistics. Ever

Free your space. Free your people.

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TREND 5

Inclusion as an industrial process. Not a statement of intent.

The session "Inclusive and Diverse Workplaces" is the most process-driven at the show. Three practitioners present a methodological guide for integrating inclusion end-to-end, from user research to delivery. The message: inclusion is not a moral commitment tacked on at the end of a project. It's a design process that starts on day one.

Deep user profiling: 28 to 30 profiles

Sam Edmonds describes a methodology that goes well beyond marketing personas. **28 to 30 user profiles**, documented from wake-up to bedtime. This level of granularity surfaces needs invisible to standard approaches: the migraine sufferer who needs specific lighting, the hearing-impaired person who depends on directional acoustics, the parent who arrives at 7am to leave at 4pm.

The most concrete figure: **8 migraine cases** caused by inadequate lighting in one project. A seemingly "small" number, but a real impact on 8 daily professional lives.

The fatal error of volunteer testing

Alex Lawlor identifies a widespread methodological error: testing new spaces with volunteers. The problem: volunteers are systematically the profiles most comfortable with change. The most vulnerable profiles — those who need inclusion the most — don't volunteer. Critical issues are missed.

The solution: curated panels, representative of actual user diversity, not their appetite for change.

The "Guardian of the Brief": an operational role

The most actionable concept of the session. Gorka Lopez proposes appointing a **"guardian of the brief"** in every project: an operational role whose mission is to protect inclusive commitments against value engineering.

The classic scenario: the brief specifies adjustable workstations, modulable lighting, quiet spaces. The budget tightens. Value engineering begins. The first elements cut are systematically the inclusive ones, deemed "optional." The guardian of the brief is there to say no.

The forgotten quick-wins

Inclusion doesn't only come through heavy investment. A self-service USB-C cable is cited as a low-cost inclusive improvement: it solves the battery problem for everyone, without targeting a specific profile. The most effective inclusion is the kind that benefits all.

OSOL PERSPECTIVE

Inclusion through energy: the universal cable case

The USB-C cable as an inclusive quick-win resonates with the Osol approach. By eliminating the question "where's the socket?", every space becomes accessible to every profile, without specific adaptation. A wheelchair user no longer needs to find a workstation that is both accessible AND plugged in. Energy mobility is an invisible but powerful lever for inclusion.

→ KEY TAKEAWAY

Appoint a "guardian of the brief" in every project. Test with curated panels, not volunteers. And look for universal inclusive quick-wins before committing to heavy investments.

TREND 6

Community as strategic infrastructure.

The session "Creating Communities" is the one that most radically reframes the stakes. Community in the workplace is not a secondary benefit of the office. It's a public health determinant, backed by sobering data.

The data that changes the conversation

The figures presented go beyond workplace scope. Chronic loneliness is associated with a **twofold increase in mortality risk**. And a potential reduction of **15 years in life expectancy**. This data, drawn from public health studies, repositions workplace community as a matter of survival, not comfort.

For many people, the office is the last place of regular socialisation. Hybrid work has weakened it. Full remote has eliminated it for some profiles entirely.

Sage: brand as community framework

The Sage case (dedicated session: "13 Offices Later") offers an operational model. **13 spaces deployed in 18 months**, from London to Atlanta via Metz, Porto and Barcelona. The key: a concise playbook of **10 to 20 pages** that sets brand values (bold, simplified, trusted, clear) as the guide for every spatial decision.

> *"Intentional coffee": the coffee strategy discussed from day one, not treated as a logistical detail.*
>
> Nicci Bird, Sage

The Sage Atlanta office pushes the model even further: 2 out of 3 floors at headquarters are a client experience centre. The office becomes a revenue platform, not just a cost centre.

Belonging as a measurable KPI

Richard Pickering (Cushman & Wakefield) introduces the concept of **"happiness of place"**: a composite metric that cross-references sense of belonging, perceived quality of interactions, and attachment to the workplace. This is no longer soft. It's an indicator correlated with retention and performance.

The model suggests structured community cohorts: by function, by geography, by interest. The office provides the physical infrastructure. But community is built with rituals, dedicated spaces, and protected time.

Sustainability through behaviour

Sage also introduces an original sustainability approach: rather than expensive environmental certifications, the company bets on behaviour change. Recycled keyboards transformed into art installations. Systematic local sourcing. Sustainability becomes visible, narrative, cultural.

→ KEY TAKEAWAY

Structure community cohorts by function and geography. Measure belonging as a KPI. And a concise playbook (10–20 pages) is enough when values and governance are solid.

TREND 7

The building as an operating system.

The session "Eliminating Friction and Frustration" is the most forward-looking at the show. Two threads converge: daily operational friction (governance, apps, spaces, AV) and the vision of the building as an operating system. The office is no longer a container. It becomes a programmable system.

The "corridor tax": the invisible cost of transit

Ana Stanojevic (Arcadis) quantifies the invisible: **15,000 sqm of corridors** in an R&D campus. Pure transit space, zero value creation. It's a metric nobody calculates, and it reveals the structural inefficiency of buildings designed before the hybrid era.

The "minimum rule set" emerges as a governance principle: a rigorous but minimal framework, with local decisions. The paradox is that deep-tech companies — those investing the most in digital — overwhelmingly favour whiteboards as their number one collaboration tool.

The building as OS: open APIs and embedded ML

Riku Rusanen describes the building's evolution towards a platform model. Open APIs for technical systems (HVAC, lighting, access control). Embedded machine learning for real-time energy optimisation. A third-party plug-in ecosystem, like a building app store.

The cost of technical intelligence in fit-out **has doubled in five years and will double again**. It's the fastest-growing budget line in workspace projects.

Scaling as a new source of friction

A flagship case: scaling from 50 to 5,000 people in an R&D campus in Poland. Scaling creates a new friction profile that conventional methods cannot handle. Safety standards that change with size. Regulatory compliance that grows in complexity. Infrastructure that doesn't scale linearly.

> *"The paradox: deep-tech companies still rely on whiteboards as their number one collaboration tool."*
>
> Session "Eliminating Friction"

The business model yet to be invented

The building-as-OS raises an unresolved economic question. Who pays for the intelligence layer? The owner (capex)? The occupier (opex)? A third-party operator (as-a-service)? Revenue models in the smart building industry are still immature, and this is the main barrier to adoption.

→ KEY TAKEAWAY

Calculate your "corridor tax": how much space in your building serves only circulation? Include a smart building budget from the initial brief. And ask which model (capex, opex, as-a-service) suits your organisation.

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

Weak Signals and Unresolved Questions

Deep Currents

Beyond the 7 trends identified, several deeper currents run through all sessions without being explicitly named. Frank Duffy's "temporal layers" recur as a background theme: the lease (15 years), the building (100+ years), the people (daily needs), technology (constant change). Every workplace decision touches these four temporalities, and most failures stem from a poorly calibrated trade-off between them.

Mark Eltringham champions writing and hand drawing as thinking processes. Collin Burry describes the office as a "three-dimensional representation of the brand", with 12 finishes in a single meeting room. The tension between industrial efficiency and quality craftsmanship runs through the entire show.

Signals and Anticipations

The impact of AGI on workforce planning. Guzmán Blanco (JLL) makes a bold prediction. AGI is coming to households "within 18 months". If these forecasts materialise even partially, the headcount assumptions on which all workplace projects rest become obsolete. And with them, desk ratios, programmed floor areas, leases signed for 9 or 12 years. How do you sign a 10-year lease when your workforce size is potentially volatile within an 18-month horizon?

> *"AGI... coming to our homes in 18 months... super intelligence... solve super problems... there will be a dip in terms of employment."*
>
> Guzmán Blanco, JLL Design

Robots in the office. Pavan Birdi (HDR) signals that the logistics robots already operating in NHS hospitals will migrate to offices. This implies new design constraints: circulation, docking, charging, human-machine cohabitation. Architects programming spaces today must anticipate mixed flows in their circulation plans.

The threat to the junior pipeline. If AI becomes a "hyper-caffeinated intern", what future for the junior roles that are talent incubators? A London law firm no longer hires below associate partner level. The paradox: the show celebrates informal learning as a reason to return to the office, but AI is eliminating the roles that benefit most from that learning. If juniors are no longer there, osmosis disappears.

> *"There is a law firm in London that does not hire anybody below an associate partner."*
>
> Nicola Gillen, on the risk of AI shortcuts

The bifurcation of the London market. The market is fracturing. On one side, premium Grade A assets that move fast (£200/sq ft predicted). On the other, a low-EPC-performance stock that is increasingly costly to upgrade. For real estate directors, the question is no longer "optimise cost per sq ft" but "which category does my portfolio sit in?"

Voice-first and its acoustic implications. If voice interfaces with AI become widespread in the office, the implications for acoustic design are considerable. Tomorrow, employees will talk as much to their AI as to their colleagues. This is a blind spot in current space programming that no one is addressing yet.

Real estate reporting to HR. Nicola Gillen signals a major organisational shift. Corporate real estate increasingly reports to CHROs rather than CFOs. The objectives are changing: from cost-per-sq-ft optimisation to employee experience, wellbeing and retention. For architects and consultants, this means learning to speak the HR language.

> *"Real estate… now is increasingly reporting to HR."*
> Nicola Gillen

Sectoral convergence. Pavan Birdi (HDR) observes that the boundaries between project typologies are blurring. Workplace borrows from labs, healthcare, hospitality. Tech campuses integrate production spaces with unprecedented compliance constraints. The consequence: more complex briefs and larger multidisciplinary teams.

Scaling as a new type of friction. Jacqui Porch describes a rarely documented case: growing from 50 to 5,000 people in a Polish scale-up. Industrial safety standards collide with agile tech culture. This type of friction will multiply.

What Was NOT Said

A few notable absences. Little discussion of the **human cost of failed transformations**. Almost nothing on the role of **unions or employee representative bodies** in transformation projects, which is surprising in a European context. And relative silence on **markets outside the UK**: French, German or Nordic realities were poorly represented despite an international audience. A reminder that the lessons from this show must be contextualised before being applied.

> *"I still think of things like writing is thinking."*
> Mark Eltringham

The Unresolved Question

The show paints a future office that is technological, intelligent, community-driven, inclusive. But who pays? The gap between vision and budget is the least discussed and most decisive tension for the real-world implementation of these trends.

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SECTION C · SESSION-BY-SESSION INSIGHTS

11 Session Recaps

Condensed overview of each session analysed. For a deeper dive into a specific talk.

SESSION 01

If the Office is Dead, Why Are We Still Designing It?

Harry McKinley (Mixed Interiors) · Alisa Young (Gensler) · Kasper Swartz (KSA) · Julian · Steve Gale · Elise

The essential: Opening session setting the show's framework. The office is not dead, but the generic, standardised office is. The office must become an intentional destination built around culture, learning and complex collaboration.

Key insights:

- The gap between spaces provided and spaces actually used is "quite wide" (Gale). Empty collaborative spaces, meeting rooms monopolised for solo work.
- Acoustics is the most critical parameter of the hybrid office. Julian proposes renaming the show "The Acoustic Design Show".
- Steve Gale wants to ban the term "ABW": it has become a catch-all that prevents clear thinking.
- "Democratized design" is an engagement lever, but beware the "Homer Simpson car" risk (McKinley).

> *"This show should be renamed the Acoustic Design Show." — Julian*

→ **Before any project, audit the real gap between spaces provided and spaces used. Acoustics is your #1 priority.**

SESSION 02

Occupancy Planning for a Changing Workforce

Vanessa Brady (SBID) · Guzmán Blanco (JLL Design) · Adrian Norman (Morgan Lovell) · Sam Fuller (Octopus Energy)

The essential: Data-driven session confronting traditional occupancy planning with hybrid reality. Plan for the peak (Tuesday), not the average. Mixed methods mandatory.

Key insights:

- Complete JLL methodology: sensors + ethnography + scenarios + post-occupancy + humility about results.
- Octopus Energy: 60-70% occupancy, Friday as a strong day. Counter to the usual pattern.
- Differentiate design by function: a call centre needs assigned desks, not hot-desking.
- Flex strategy: sublease surplus floors to an operator, with a take-back option.

Data: 30% average occupancy · Tuesday peak 60%+ · -60% internal emails post-ABW (JLL) · AI: stacking in seconds via HRIS integration

→ **Plan for peak occupancy (Tuesday), not the average. And build flex into your next leases.**

SESSION 03

Work is Changing: What Does the Future Hold for Architecture and Design?

Mark Eltringham · Nicola Gillen · Helen Berresford · Collin Burry

The essential: The most philosophical session of the show. Workplace design at the crossroads of AI, talent, HR governance and temporal layers (lease, building, technology, people).

Key insights:

- Frank Duffy's "temporal layers": the lease (15 years), the building (100+ years), people (daily needs), technology (constant change).
- Real estate increasingly reports to HR, not finance. The objectives are changing.
- Writing and hand drawing are championed as thinking processes, not just deliverables.
- The office as a "three-dimensional representation of the brand" (Burry). 12 finishes in a single meeting room.

> *"I still think of things like writing is thinking." — Mark Eltringham*

→ **Integrate the four temporalities (lease, building, people, technology) into every project brief.**

SESSION 04

How AI is Impacting the Workplace

Cristiano Peretti · Pavan Birdi (HDR) · Anna Burles (BIID)

The essential: Technical session on AI. Focus on concrete impacts (strategy, brief, procurement, London real estate market) rather than the daily tool.

Key insights:

- The aerospace analogy (Birdi): use AI to converge, not to multiply options.
- Landlords use AI to test feasibility before engaging an architect. The decision point shifts upstream.
- 60 pages of legal terms at some clients for AI. HDR is building its own internal model.
- Sectoral convergence: labs, healthcare, hospitality are converging towards workplace.

Data: £200/sq ft for London premium · London = world's most expensive city for office construction · NHS robots migrating to offices

→ **Demand transparency on embedded AI in your procurement processes and favour internal models.**

SESSION 05

From Artificial to Real Intelligence

Lewis Barker (ServiceNow) · Hayley Samuels (ServiceNow) · Andrew Emmett · Conor Gantly · Chloe (LinkedIn)

The essential: Operational session on real AI deployment. AI excels at well-defined tasks with clean data. It is limited as soon as contextual reasoning or multi-system integration is needed.

Key insights:

- The ServiceNow case (72,000 hours saved) is the most concrete ROI of the show.
- The Germany error (30,000 vs 65,000 sq ft) demonstrates the absolute necessity of local human validation.
- "Data as guide rail, not driver": usage data is only a guide.
- "Problem-first" method: identify bottlenecks, then check whether AI solves a precise fragment.

> *"When the rubber hits the road… people get found out quite quickly." — Lewis Barker*

→ **Start by connecting your 2 core systems (HRIS + booking, or ticketing + analytics). Orchestrating AI will only work on connected data.**

SESSION 06

From Brief to Business Impact

Adrian Norman (Morgan Lovell) · Sarah Grime (The Gym Group) · Sarah Edwards (D&B) · Idrienne (Paysafe)

The essential: The most complete business case of the show. Two case studies (The Gym Group, Paysafe) demonstrating how upstream strategy + Design & Build partnership deliver measurable results.

Key insights:

- The Gym Group: strategic engagement before building selection. Result: 9/10 satisfaction, Top 5% PCOM.
- Paysafe: 16,000 sq ft, connecting staircase installed live, brand change mid-project. 4.5 months from appointment to site start.
- "Bold doesn't mean spectacular": bold decisions are functional and phased.

Data: 9/10 engagement · Top 5% PCOM · 4.5 months appointment-to-site (Paysafe)

→ **Engage a strategic partner before selecting the building. The brief must precede the property search.**

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SESSION 07

Networks as Workplaces

Helena Hughes (Savills) · Kirsty Shearer (Agility Solutions) · Samantha Jinks (TSK) · Muriel Altunaga Aguirre (The Flow)

The essential: Community repositioned as operational infrastructure. Three-layer model, micro-rituals, external networks, and the proposition of "happiness" and "belonging" as KPIs.

Key insights:

- The three-layer community architecture (local-physical, functional cohorts, cross-border groups) is the most actionable framework.
- The seniority paradox: the higher you go, the lonelier it gets. External networks become critical.
- Young lawyers prefer enclosed spaces and senior proximity. Against the Gen Z "open-collab" stereotype.

Data: 2x mortality risk without community ties · ~15 years reduced life expectancy (chronic loneliness)

→ **Structure community cohorts by function and geography. Measure belonging as a KPI.**

SESSION 08

Transforming How We Work

Jennifer Bryan · Paula Rowntree (Imperial College) · Oliver Boote · Bex Moorhouse

The essential: The most operational session on change management. Field methodologies from banking, higher education and global design. The concept of workplace as a "mini-city" emerges.

Key insights:

- Enablement-led change (Bryan): confidence, psychological safety, competence. Leaders embody the change.
- Imperial College: 1,400 relocated, open town halls, batching of 156 change requests.
- ERGs exist everywhere, but nobody asks them what they need (Moorhouse).
- Protecting refuge spaces is a fight against extroverted leaders who want to eliminate them.

> *"Curiosity and empathy are probably the number one things." — Bex Moorhouse*

→ **Before any project, go ask the ERGs what they need. It is the most underexploited source of insight.**

SESSION 09

Sage: 13 Offices Later

Nicci Bird (Sage) · Christian Brooks · Florrie Chow (Sage)

The essential: Brand-led deployment model at global scale. 13 spaces in 18 months. Brand as strategic framework, not as final visual layer. A 10-20 page playbook.

Key insights:

- The brand team sets the strategic framework from the start. Brand personality (bold, simplified, trusted, clear) guides spatial choices.
- "Intentional coffee" as a strategic lever: coffee strategy discussed from day 1, not treated as a logistics detail.
- Dual-use in Atlanta: 2 out of 3 floors of HQ are a client experience centre. The office becomes a revenue platform.
- Sustainability through behaviour: keyboards recycled into installations, local sourcing.

Data: 13 spaces in 18 months · 10-20 page playbook · Locations: London, Metz, Porto, Barcelona, Atlanta

→ **A concise playbook (10-20 pages) is enough when values and governance are solid. No need for 200 pages.**

SESSION 10

Inclusive and Diverse Workplaces

Sam Edmonds · Alex Lawlor · Gorka Lopez

The essential: The most process-oriented session of the show. A methodological guide for embedding inclusion end-to-end, from user research to delivery.

Key insights:

- Deep user profiling (28-30 profiles, from waking to sleeping) surfaces needs invisible to standard approaches.
- The volunteer testing error: volunteers do not represent real diversity. Critical issues are missed.
- The "guardian of the brief": an operational role to protect inclusive commitments against cost-cutting.
- The case of the 8 migraine sufferers: inadequate lighting has a real impact, even on a "small" number.

Data: 28-30 user profiles · USB-C cable as a low-cost inclusive improvement · 8 migraine cases from inadequate lighting

→ **Appoint a "guardian of the brief" in every project. And test with curated panels, not with volunteers.**

SESSION 11

Eliminating Friction and Frustration

Ana Stanojevic (Arcadis) · Stuart Beety · Riku Rusanen · Jacqui Porch · Chloe (LinkedIn)

The essential: The most forward-looking session of the show. Two converging threads: operational friction (governance, apps, spaces, AV) and the vision of the building as an operating system.

Key insights:

- The "corridor tax": 15,000 sq m of corridors in an R&D campus. Pure transit space, zero value creation.
- Minimum rule set with local autonomy: rigorous but minimal framework, local decisions.
- The analogue paradox: in deep-tech companies, whiteboards remain the #1 tool.
- The building as an OS: open APIs, embedded ML, plug-ins, business model yet to be invented.
- Scaling from R&D to production creates a new friction profile (safety standards, compliance).

Data: 15,000 sq m of corridors · From 50 to 5,000 people (Poland scale-up) · Fit-out intelligence cost x2 in 5 years

→ **Calculate your "corridor tax": how many sq m in your building serve only circulation without creating value?**

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SECTION D · CLOSING

10 Actionable Steps for Monday Morning

This show is not just about trends. It translates into decisions. Here are ten actionable steps you can take this week, organised by decision-maker profile.

For Workplace Directors / Heads of Work Environment / Facility Managers

1. **Audit the gap between the spaces you provide and the spaces actually used.** Not with a simple occupancy rate. With sensors, ethnography, and humility about the results.
2. **Plan for the peak (Tuesday), not the average.** And build flex into your next leases: sublease surplus floors to an operator, with a take-back option.
3. **Appoint a "guardian of the brief"** in every transformation project. Mission: protect inclusive and quality commitments against value engineering.
4. **Go ask the ERGs what they need.** It is the most underexploited source of insight in your organisation. And protect refuge spaces with usage data.

For CIOs / IT Managers

5. **Connect your 2 core systems** (HRIS + booking, or ticketing + analytics). It is the prerequisite for any serious workplace AI integration.
6. **Demand transparency on embedded AI** in your procurement processes. 60 pages of legal terms is the new standard for enterprise clients.

For Real Estate Directors / CRE

7. **Calculate your "corridor tax"**: how many sq m in your building serve only circulation without creating value? It is the metric nobody looks at.
8. **Include a smart building budget from the initial brief.** The cost of technical intelligence has doubled in 5 years. Ignoring it means falling behind before you start.

For Architects / Workplace Consultants

9. **Integrate Duffy's 4 temporalities** (lease, building, people, technology) into every project brief. Most failures stem from a poorly calibrated trade-off between them.
10. **Start with change management, not the floor plan.** Spatial transformation fails when it starts with design. Enablement precedes fit-out.

These ten actions are not a manifesto. They are first steps. WDS London 2026 paints a future office that is intentional, intelligent, community-driven and inclusive. The question is no longer "should we change?" but "where do we start?". The answer is in this list.

ABOUT

REPORT AUTHOR

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Engineer and entrepreneur, Maxime Cousin co-founded Osol following a technology transfer programme from the European Space Agency (ESA) and CNES. He advises companies on the transformation of their workspaces and regularly speaks as an analyst and keynote on workplace strategy, the future of work and corporate real estate innovation.

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ABOUT OSOL

Osol has developed the first self-service smart battery network for workspaces. The company helps real estate, workplace and IT professionals improve the workplace experience across their sites, achieve significant cost savings and reduce their carbon footprint by eliminating power cables, fixed outlets and laptop chargers from all meeting rooms, hybrid spaces and informal areas.

Made in Europe and present in 15 countries, deployed by over 120 international companies, Osol has won multiple Workplace and CSR awards and is selected among the solutions of the World Alliance Solar Impulse.

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