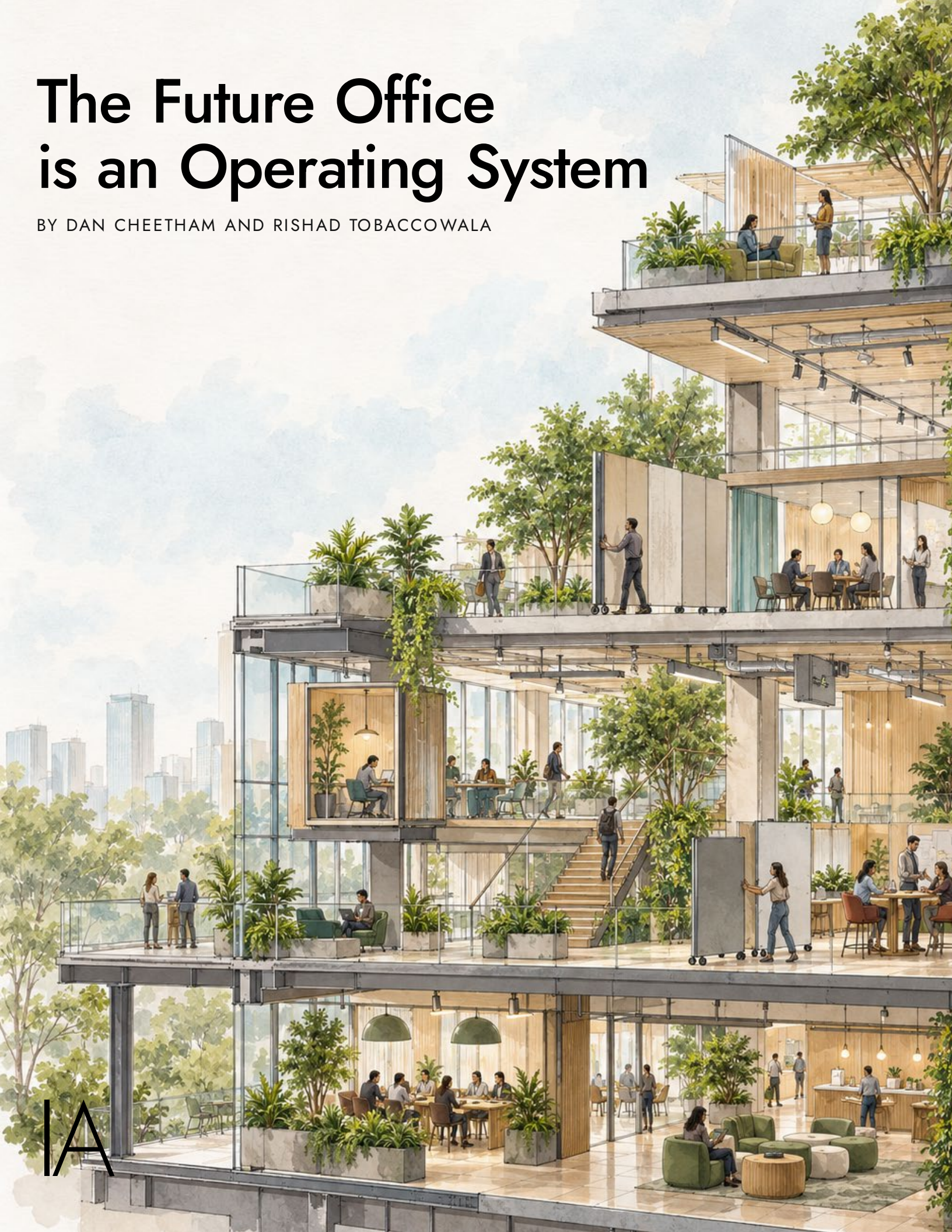


The Future Office is an Operating System

BY DAN CHEETHAM AND RISHAD TOBACOWALA



IA

What we do shapes who we are. It gives us purpose, meaning, identity, room to grow, and a living.

Because of converging forces such as aging and declining populations, global talent marketplaces, AI, and the long arc of Covid, work is shifting faster now than at any point in the past fifty years. One of the most profound implications is the changing role of physical space, or what has historically been called the office. The current debate is framed as fully remote, hybrid, or full-time in the office.

Advocates for full-time presence stress culture, relationship building, learning, quality control and the irreplaceable serendipity that arises when people work together in shared space.

Advocates for remote models highlight the power of global talent pools, increased access for those who need flexibility, dramatically reduced real estate costs, and alignment with a more fluid and technology-enabled economy.



**Both sides have valid evidence.
Most organizations blend the two,
searching for internal equilibrium.**

**Yet the core question is no longer
return to office or not return to office.
More useful questions are:**

Purposeful Presence

How does a company maximize the benefits of in-person interaction while minimizing cost and strengthening its ability to attract and retain talent?

Visible Culture

How can culture become visible, felt, and shared so that people experience genuine belonging?

Evolving Workforce

How can organizations prepare for a workforce made up of full-time, part-time, freelance, contract, and agentic contributors that assemble and reassemble around shifting work demands?



For most of human history, people worked without holding modern jobs. Even now, fewer than 38%* of working people globally are employed within formal job structures.

As work moves into the cloud, crosses borders, and merges with advancing technology and agentic tools, the traditional job becomes less relevant as a container. Work and jobs are beginning to separate, much like music separated from vinyl and CDs and reorganized into cloud-based playlists shaped by desired outcomes.

Companies will increasingly determine the outcomes clients need, then assemble the right combination of talent to deliver them.

That may include full-time onsite employees, full-time remote workers, part-time staff, freelancers, contract partners or agentic systems. Quality, speed, and value define the blend.

This approach requires companies to think in terms of spaces and places, not a single space. It asks that culture, learning, quality control, and belonging be distributed across diverse talent types, each with different rhythms and capabilities.



The future of work functions less like a classical orchestra, where every musician remains in a fixed position under a conductor's baton, and more like jazz, where improvisation, handoff, and shared frameworks create the performance. The score becomes emergent.



The physical office will succeed when it offers what home or a third space cannot. It must deliver spatial experiences that earn the commute through energy, interaction, technology access, and cultural resonance. Meanwhile, talent will continue to work from home, from the road, and from other environments.

Teams will contract and expand. In this context, the office becomes hardware that is organic and flexible, supported by software such as work practices and policies that create agility and cost competitiveness.

A realistic question emerges. If a company were redesigned today with everything known about demographic shifts, AI, Covid's legacy, global marketplaces, and the unbundling of jobs and work, would its real estate footprint remain the same? Unlikely.

Relying on 2019 office designs because of leases or comfort with proximity will not compete with organizations now forming. Newer companies are born AI-first, draw talent from everywhere, and are built for speed with spatial strategies designed for adaptability and continuous interplay between physical and digital environments.

So what does an operating system office look like in practice? Most offices were built for a past era. They lack both adaptability and emotional resonance.

In a time marked by loneliness and disconnection, workplaces must give physical expression to culture. Identity and belonging must show up in the architecture itself:

Ritualized arrival zones that anchor people at the beginning and end of the day, personalized artworks or narrative installations that reflect shared values, communal terraces that offer restoration, or signature experiences that mark milestones and rituals.

These elements make the abstract tangible. They transform workplaces from neutral containers into cultural engines. Achieving this requires treating space as a platform rather than a finished project.

Traditional office delivery depends on long leases, extended design and construction cycles and predictable occupancy. Yet none of these assumptions hold true today. The pace of change has outstripped the speed of conventional real estate development.



Modular furniture systems



Demountable partitions



3D-printed components

Architecture must pivot from designing for end-users to designing for beginning users, the people who will continuously redefine the space across time. In this framework, a building becomes a living platform. Structure and infrastructure serve as hardware. The flexible layers of furniture, layout, programming, and cultural overlays serve as software that updates frequently.

Just as talent now enters and exits organizations fluidly, space must support pop-in, plug-in, fade-out. The jazz metaphor applies here as well. Structure provides meter and chord. Inhabitable zones create an improvisational space where people perform and collaborate. These zones are modular, dynamic, and responsive, not rigid seating charts.

Instead of delivering fully built spaces locked into decade-long leases, organizations can launch with pilot areas or beta environments where new practices, technologies, or cultural behaviors are tested before scaling. Teams can move into partially complete frameworks that evolve as they inhabit them. Other zones function like pop-up environments assembled quickly and reconfigured just as fast.

Flexibility itself becomes core infrastructure. Subscription-based furniture, modular walls and lighting, and systems that reconfigure over a weekend prevent capital drag. On site 3D printing hubs can generate partitions, furniture, signage and spatial markers on demand. Brainstorming and innovation zones can appear, be used intensely, and dissolve when priorities shift.

Hybrid work raises a defining question: what earns the commute?



People will not leave home for static desks and fluorescent lights. They will come for environments that support focus in the morning, offer restorative indoor and outdoor settings at midday, enable high energy collaboration in the afternoon, and create community and culture in the evening.

Viewed through this lens, buildings stop functioning as static shells and begin behaving like operating systems. Hardware and software evolve in concert across structure, services, layout, furniture, programming, cultural layers and experiences.

Predictable occupancy patterns give way to dynamic ecosystems tuned daily or seasonally. Spaces for emergence become essential since innovation requires environments that support experimentation and collective thinking.

The most effective offices behave like living ecosystems, more akin to reefs than floor plans. Reefs thrive because structure, species, nutrients and currents interact to create life far greater than the sum of individual parts. Similarly, the workplace becomes an adaptive cultural system when its architectural structure, spatial flexibility, talent networks and cultural programming interact as one organism.

This is how the office becomes a true operating system.
Resilient. Adaptive. Always capable of becoming something new.

HARDWARE

Places
Components
Infrastructure
Environments

+

SOFTWARE

Policies
Practices
Culture
Technology

+

PEOPLE

Employees
Freelancers
Partners
AI Agents



Work can no longer be defined by an org chart or a single address.

Workplaces must evolve as living systems, fluid networks of talent supported by a constellation of interconnected places. Two challenges undermine this shift.

CHALLENGE ONE

Misalignment of vision and place

Corporate vision and workplace strategy often exist in separate lanes. Leadership defines where the organization is heading while corporate real estate manages leases, assets, and capital cycles. The connection is thin. The result is strategy without a spatial home or real estate that sits underutilized and disconnected from the company's purpose.

CHALLENGE TWO

Inertia of legacy real estate

Many organizations are tied to millions of square feet of inherited office space designed for a world that no longer exists. The question is not simply remote, hybrid, or in person. The deeper challenge is aligning a company's future vision with the physical assets it already occupies and transforming those assets into environments where culture becomes visible, shared and resilient. Culture is the connective tissue that binds people, purpose, and place.

Space should celebrate an organization's mission while creating the conditions for culture to emerge through everyday interactions, shared experiences, and collective ownership. This includes environments that foster belonging, experiences that create lasting memories, and infrastructure that evolves at the same pace as the people and the world around it.

If the office is an operating system, then the future is not a single upgrade. It is about learning how to evolve the system continuously.

The shift begins with a mindset. Companies must stop treating space as a downstream outcome of work strategy and start treating it as an active instrument of performance, culture, and adaptability.

This means moving from asking, “How much space do we need?” to asking, “what outcomes do we need to enable, and what environments best support them?”



The first practical step is alignment. Leadership teams must bring business strategy, talent strategy, and real estate strategy into the same conversation. Vision cannot live in slide decks while space decisions live in spreadsheets. When these conversations are integrated, organizations can begin to design environments that reinforce how they actually want to work, not how they used to work.

Next comes experimentation. Rather than committing to full-scale transformations, companies can pilot. Small zones become test beds. A floor, a wing, a lobby, or an amenity space becomes a beta environment where new behaviors, technologies, and cultural rituals are explored. These pilots reduce risk while creating real data about how people engage, collaborate, and belong. What works scales. What does not evolves or disappears.

At the same time, companies must invest in adaptability as a core capability. This means designing buildings and interiors that can change without disruption. Modular systems, flexible infrastructure, subscription-based furnishings, and reconfigurable spaces allow organizations to respond to shifting team sizes, new modes of collaboration, and emerging technologies without costly resets.

Adaptability becomes a strategic asset, not an afterthought.

Equally important is cultural clarity. If space is going to express culture, the culture must be articulated. Companies need to define what they want people to feel, experience, and remember when they come together. Belonging, learning, trust, and momentum do not happen by accident. They are reinforced through rituals, spatial cues, shared experiences, and moments of meaning embedded into the environment.

Finally, organizations must embrace iteration.

An operating system is never finished. It updates. It patches. It learns from use. The most resilient companies will be those that treat their workplaces as living systems, monitored and adjusted over time. Occupancy patterns, team behaviors, energy levels, and engagement become signals that guide continuous refinement.

The future office is not a destination. It is a capability.

Organizations that succeed will not be the ones that guess correctly once, but the ones that build systems able to sense change, respond quickly, and evolve gracefully. By rethinking the office as an operating system, companies unlock a future where space is no longer a constraint, but a catalyst for performance, culture, and human connection.

The office must be re-imagined as an operating system: flexible, adaptive and deeply human. Organizations that align vision with environment and convert legacy assets into evolving platforms will be the ones that thrive as the future of work unfolds.



Authors



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Dan Cheetham, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP BD+C, is the founder and managing principal of FYOOG, an IA company. For more than 30 years, he has explored how architecture and art can unlock new potential, supporting changing needs, new patterns of use, and stronger connections between people and place.

Drawing from architecture, art, music, and systems thinking, Dan examines how design can extend a building's relevance, improve how it performs, and create a framework for continued change.

Dan has led firms, teams, and projects around the world, from large urban districts and commercial environments to educational settings, outdoor spaces, temporary installations, and sculpture. Across scales and typologies, his approach brings together rigor, curiosity, and adaptability to reimagine what existing places can become. He holds a BA in Architecture and Music Performance.



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Rishad is the author of *Restoring the Soul of Business: Staying Human in the Age of Data* and *Rethinking Work*, both published by HarperCollins. His additional writing appears in *The Future Does Not Fit in the Containers of the Past*, read by 32,000 leaders around the world each week.

He hosts three global podcasts: *What Next?*, featuring people inventing the future; *Rethinking Work*, highlighting pioneers navigating a world where work and jobs are unbundling; and *Unbossing*, where global leaders share their learnings and unlearnings.

Over the past five years, Rishad has delivered more than 300 keynotes and workshops. Most recently, he served as Global Strategist and Chief Growth Officer of Publicis Groupe, a global marketing and business transformation company with more than 100,000 employees. BusinessWeek named him one of its top business leaders for pioneering innovation, while TIME recognized him as one of five "Marketing Innovators." Rishad is also one of just 300 people inducted into the Advertising Hall of Fame in its 75-year history.