

Inside Ikea’s post-pandemic Singapore office – yes, the furniture is its own – plus how Herman Miller, Steelcase are adapting to new workspace needs

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- The Swedish company is among a number of furniture giants creating office spaces that cater to post-pandemic work

As our Singapore clients return to the post-pandemic office, we are delighted to contribute to this timely [article](#) for South China Morning Post newspaper.

102



Post



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Greg Pearce, managing director and co-founder, One Space



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These concerns are not insurmountable, says Greg Pearce, managing director and co-founder of One Space, a business interiors firm based in Hong Kong and Singapore whose client base reads like a who’s who of Fortune 500s across the region.

“Asia has some of the most innovative, nimble and fast-to-market-system furniture industries in the world,” Pearce says. “Those manufacturers have quickly been able to modify their product offerings to create more ergonomic and productive set-ups. Just as quickly, they have been able to incorporate antimicrobial textiles, easy-to-clean surfaces and touchless technology into their specifications.”



The One Space-designed KPMG office, in Wong Chuk Hang, was set up to cope with changes in work habits. Photo: Graham Uden

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**Naomi Healy**[+ FOLLOW](#)

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Ikea's refurbished Singapore headquarters ensures all staff are seated at least one metre apart.

Only time will tell what the “new normal” looks like post-pandemic, but while the world has its thinking cap on, some of the biggest names in office design and fit-out have been using results gathered from the largest work-from-home experiment ever to create environments for a wary workforce.

In April, Swedish giant Ikea, not known for its office products despite being the world's largest home furnishing retailer, reinvented the workspace of its Singapore headquarters and in the process found a formula that prompted a relaunch of its little-known B2B offering, Ikea for Business.

At the office in Singapore's Tampines neighbourhood, Ikea decided on an office rebuild to meet the government's new social distancing rules and create an inspiring space to which people would want to return – at 50 per cent capacity, for now – after nine months of working from home.

The process began with a survey of the office's 180 staff, says Gwinna Wareewanish, Ikea Southeast Asia's head of interior design, who oversaw the refurbishment.

“We initially asked for their opinion on working from home, their feelings about returning to work and what they thought the old office could improve on,” she says. “Then we looked at how we all worked through the pandemic on different tasks, such as focused individual work at home and connecting online, and their efficiency.”



Meeting pods at Ikea's Singapore headquarters are designed for calls, virtual meetings or simply personal reflection.

The result is a modern, functional office that addresses its staff's biggest concerns of cleanliness, storage and flexibility, and makes work feel as comfortable as at home.

The space is based on an open concept with a range of seated or standing hot desks that can be reserved via a mobile app. Spatial design is used to ensure staff are seated at least one metre apart – according to social-distancing guidelines – creating a fishbone layout of sorts.

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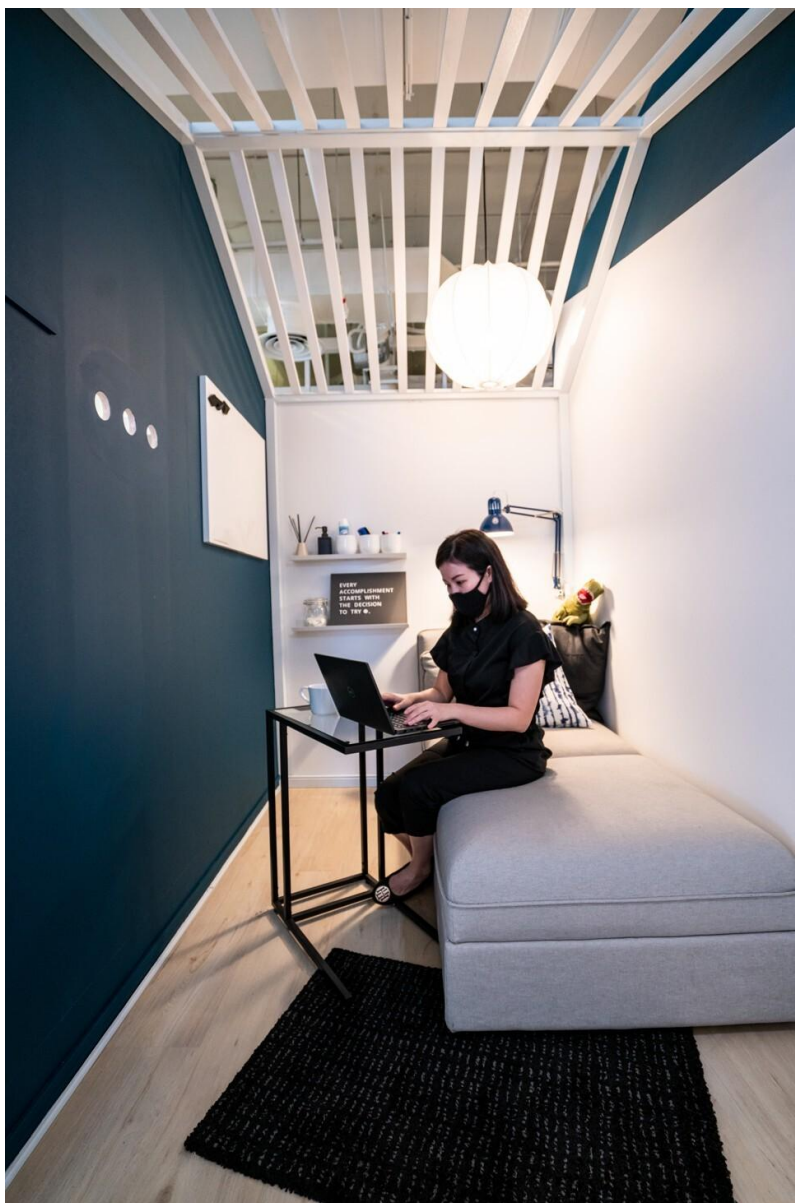
Flexible spaces to meet and brainstorm, which provide different working options for different tasks, include a central pantry, green open spaces, and “homey” soft-seating meeting pods for personal reflection or calls and virtual meetings. Importantly, they all retain Ikea’s unique identity and culture.

As the office took shape, its broader commercial use was realised. While the products themselves have long existed in-store – strong sellers in the home-office market – the office provides a showpiece with which the revised Ikea for Business offering can highlight its interior design planning, product knowledge and project co-ordination services, at what it calls “for the many” prices.

“Even the day when hopefully Covid has all gone, I think we will have a much higher percentage of co-workers and colleagues working at home at any point in time,” says Christian Carlsen, Ikea for Business’ regional manager for Southeast Asia. “This model gives you different functionalities, a better combination. That, we think, is something that has come to stay.”



A meeting room at Ikea’s Singapore headquarters.



A private working area at Ikea's Singapore headquarters.

Ikea's survey findings resonate with those of the world's leading supplier of office furniture, US-based Steelcase, which suggest that people want their organisations to improve the experience at work.

Steelcase recently published the results of its global study on the impact of Covid-19 on work, workers and the workplace. The findings are the cumulation of eight primary studies across 10 countries, including China, analysing 8,000 spaces and questioning 32,000 people.

The report found that although employees in the Asia-Pacific region have enjoyed some aspects of working from home, such as cutting commutes and better work-life balance, anxiety about disease transmission remains high.



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These concerns are not insurmountable, says Greg Pearce, managing director and co-founder of One Space, a business interiors firm based in Hong Kong and Singapore whose client base reads like a who's who of Fortune 500s across the region.

“Asia has some of the most innovative, nimble and fast-to-market-system furniture industries in the world,” Pearce says. “Those manufacturers have quickly been able to modify their product offerings to create more ergonomic and productive set-ups. Just as quickly, they have been able to incorporate antimicrobial textiles, easy-to-clean surfaces and touchless technology into their specifications.”

Steelcase has also done that, with its On the QT phone booths, Coppice stand-alone workbooths and Air 3 acoustic pod ranges, for example.



Steelcase's Orangebox Air3 Acoustic Pod can act as a free-standing meeting room, private space or phone booth.

So too has US-based Herman Miller, the world's second largest supplier of office furniture, with its OE1 Workspace Collection. The pieces in the collection include mobile tables, movable walls, height-adjustable workstations, and storage trolleys which directly respond to how and where people want to work.

Pearce says that since the pandemic began, not one major client has urged One Space to reintroduce the sterile cubicle environment of the '80s and '90s, or the completely enclosed individual office formats one might expect when a virus is running virulent.

“Instead, there has been a new interest in shielded settings – pods and other ways of getting distance between staff – that are complementary to their existing open-plan layouts,” he says.



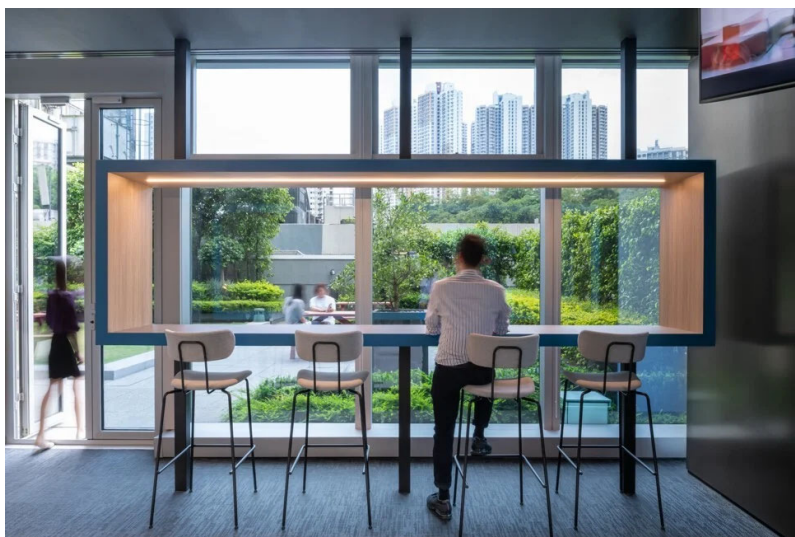
Herman Miller's OE1 Workspace Collection.

The result is popularly termed “blended” and was already prevailing before Covid-19 hit, Pearce says. One Space used the concept in its office build for “Big Four” management consultancy firm KPMG last year, in Wong Chuk Hang in Hong Kong.

The KPMG office is a case study of a workspace inadvertently set up with the ability to cope with the change in work habits brought about by Covid-19. That’s thanks to the level of diversity built into the environment and its distributed working model, which caters to employees who work in different physical locations at once.



The One Space-designed KPMG office, in Wong Chuk Hang, was set up to cope with changes in work habits. Photo: Graham Uden



A high desk for workers at KPMG's Wong Chuk Hang office.
Photo: Graham Uden

It's a model Herman Miller is also banking on. The company announced in April its intention to acquire fellow top-end furniture manufacturer Knoll in a transaction valued at US\$1.8 billion, bringing together two pioneering icons of modern American design.

“As distributed working models become the new normal for companies, businesses are reimagining the office to foster collaboration, culture and focused work, while supporting a growing remote employee base,” said Herman Miller president and CEO Andi Owen in an April press statement. “At the same time, consumers are making significant investments in their homes.”

Herman Miller plans to meet them at both. A post-pandemic life by design.