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WORKPLACE DESIGN

# It Starts With Furniture – TPG Designer Weighs In On The Timing Of Project Elements

AS MORE FLEXIBILITY IS NEEDED IN THE WORKSPACE, IT'S LESS ABOUT NEEDING THE PERFECT SPACE AND MORE ABOUT CREATING AN AGILE SPACE THAT CAN BE RECONFIGURED AT ANY POINT TO ACCOMMODATE GROWTH AND CHANGE.

by Emily Clingman

**As office design** takes on a different look these days, experts in the field remind us furniture should be integrated into the process from day one.

“Furniture is a big budget number,” said Suzette Subance, creative director at TPG Architecture in New York. “But it’s the furniture that informs the culture your office is going to emulate. So, in many ways, the furniture is a huge component to development.”

While Subance sees improvement by way of more collaboration between developers, architects, designers and furniture manufacturers, she’d like to see designers come in when a design project starts.

“It’s helpful for developers and architects to understand interior design and business models and have the willingness to bring on all the expertise needed right away,” Subance said.

As more flexibility is needed in the workspace, it’s less about needing the perfect space and more about creating an agile space that can be reconfigured at any point to accommodate growth and change. In this case, furniture does the heavy lifting.

“Furniture can be a lifeline, especially to designers,” Subance said. “We’re seeing companies like Orangebox and Framery come up with furniture as architectural solutions that clients are able to use help define space.”

Pieces like phone booths, privacy chairs, meeting pods and flexible furniture can help in future reconfigurations.

“As designers, we’re looking at furniture to help manage budgets and to help define space,” Subance said. “And on a client side, they are looking at cost savings because they aren’t putting a bunch of money into construction. They want pieces they can continue to use, reuse or modify. It’s really becoming a very exciting time. Furniture is having a huge effect on the landscape of the workspace.”

Subance says she's hearing clients talk a lot about future-proofing the office, making it agile and ready to reconfigure at any moment, in a way that architecture doesn't allow for. It's almost better to start with a box and let the furniture define the spaces.

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## FURNITURE MANUFACTURERS ARE VALUING WHAT DESIGNERS ARE BRINGING TO THE TABLE, AND DESIGNERS ARE ALSO APPRECIATING WHAT THE MANUFACTURERS ARE BRINGING TO THE TABLE.

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“We can't futureproof everything, but we can provide more flexibility now,” she said. “For instance, OFS, a few years back created pieces that helped define huddle spaces. And that's really exciting as far as how architecture, furniture and interiors are blending.”

Reference to workspace types ultimately translates to furniture. Whether someone has a large workstation, a bench, a large cafe, a lot of open collaborative workspaces or private offices — all of these things translate directly to furniture. Flexible furniture, especially with technology, integrates an extra layer that architecture can't do.

If this is the way things are going, Subance says furniture considerations must be a priority and remain a priority throughout the progress of the project. This is especially important with the rise in ancillary space design. Subance says about 50% of furniture budgets go to workstations and 50% to ancillary furniture — sofas, huddle booths, cafe tables, etcetera. The increase in mobility demands more settings.

“So, if you take out a sofa or collaboration space to make cuts in the end because of dwindling budgets, you minimize (the concept) so that it's not a statement anymore or even a fleshed-out idea, people aren't going to use it,” she said.

Workspace designers often are one step ahead of the furniture manufacturers, according to Subance.

“We see it all intertwined — the culture, the furniture solutions, the flex-

ibility, the wireless, the power ... one is just informing the other,” she said.

But ideas take time to develop and manufacture. Because of that, a lot of commercial furniture companies are looking to the retail residential market for cues and partnership to create their own solutions.

“We’re seeing companies like Herman Miller and Steelcase develop their own ancillary lines,” Subance said. “But, it’s really hard for giant companies to suddenly change their business model, so it’s taking some time for these manufacturers to come up to speed. Buying smaller companies that specialize in ancillary furniture or forming partnerships with them, are becoming more common.”

Subance said she’s seeing a two-way street between furniture manufacturers and the design community. Furniture manufacturers are valuing what designers are bringing to the table, and designers are also appreciating what the manufacturers are bringing to the table.

“There’s a nice synergy there,” she said. “It helps us all bring the best of the best to the clients. That’s one of the things I see really working. Furniture manufacturers are more willing to share their knowledge and the studies they’ve been doing. It makes us all better.

With more collaboration, Subance said it’s easier to find individual solutions for individual clients.

Flex solutions are on trend right now. Subance noted West Elm is really changing the way people look at workspace. Clients are also resonating with Orangebox solutions and Koleksiyon’s Oblivion line.

It’s defining space without the hard architecture. And with that, the idea is to create a workspace that inspires people. What will the journey through the space throughout the workday feel?

“In our everyday lives, there are so many things that stimulate and inspire us outside of work,” Subance said. “How do we bring that same type of stimulation into the work environment? How do we inspire them day in and day out to do their best work? How do we keep them refreshed during the work day? Those are things that are hard to articulate but really important in keeping employees happy, attraction and retention.”

It all starts with furniture.

Once the furniture defines the space, which also feeds into the culture, then other elements like technology and ergonomic light, sound and air quality come into play, then social elements and amenities. These all circle back to furniture in some way. Furniture should be thought about as part of the architectural design, Subance says. It’s more than just a desk and a chair. **BoF**