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Sitting is the New Side Hustle: The Workplace in 2030
Episode 22 Transcript

Episode Description:
In "Sitting is the New Side Hustle," we reveal our forecast for the Future of Work in 2030. We explore a world where furniture coordinates everything from personal data collection to generating extra income from energy-producing surfaces. Join us as we delve into the seamless integration of work and life, where values and purpose hold more significance than a paycheck. Employees thrive in a world where access is valued over ownership, leading to innovative co-ownership and new subscription models. Discover how the role of the designer will evolve to include "placemaking" of environments found within and beyond traditional office spaces. Stick around after the forecast as we provide 5 practical takeaways for designers to implement today, shaping a better future!

Kaelynn Reid: [00:00] Welcome to the Alternative Design podcast, where we explore the power of foresight and design to create future-ready spaces. In each episode, we talk to diverse voices to discover the ways our world is changing and uncover insights that will influence the built environment of tomorrow. I'm your host, Kaelynn Reid, an interior designer and certified futurist, and I want to help designers think like futurists so we can take actionable steps today to become makers of a better future. This is it, listeners, our finale. This season we've looked at signals of change that included everything from microbreweries to YouTube, giving us clues as to how the world of design is changing. It's been a bit different than our normal bread and butter topics, but, man, has it been an exciting change. As a futurist, I'm thrilled anytime we can paint a picture of the future that inspires hope and change in the design community. I believe that foresight gives us not a crystal ball per se, but more like a really well-educated guess that can prepare us for a lot of possible futures. This scenario I'm about to share is all about the future of work. This topic is an enigma and, frankly, it's really hard to not step on toes because, honestly, we're all still trying to figure it out. But my intention is to take this glimpse of what I believe could happen and give us some actionable insights to walk away with. So, stick with me and I'll tell you exactly what trends you need to be looking for and how we can respond to shape the future we all want. This is episode 22, Sitting is the New Side Hustle: The Workplace in 2030.

By 2030, the workplace landscape will be completely redrawn. Nine to fives will be a thing of the past, making way for more modern forms of time tracking that will unlock completely new paradigms around where the workplace actually is. No one will be talking about work-life balance anymore, because instead, work and life will be seamless. Data-driven insights will help employees craft the lifestyles they want with the convenience of bundled subscriptions. The role of the designer will expand to include new digital experiences, and furniture will quite literally expand to support blended solutions that will forever blur the lines between industries. It starts with what many called the great downsizing of 2024. The design of the new space, faced with the soaring costs of maintaining large office spaces and the realization that many desks still remained empty, were forced to rethink their real estate strategies. This led to an era of unprecedented collaboration and innovation, where offices began to share spaces with diverse industries, giving rise to new models of co-ownership. By 2025, seemingly disparate industries basically became roommates. Clinics began sharing space with luxury hotels, and senior living facilities coexisted with elementary schools, all contributing to the blurring of sector lines. Designers, with the help of chat GPT, were able to identify similar user needs, like respite rooms that could be used by corporate employees, nurses and students, and, as AI generated new materials that met rigorous cleaning, durability, and sustainability standards, more and more products could hold universal applications. These shared spaces

became vibrant hubs of activity where individuals from various backgrounds, professions and ages could come together, fostering a sense of community and collaboration. Offices weren't insular anymore, no longer private environments, but instead they became a hub of resources that were open to the public. This novel approach not only transformed the paradigm of the workplace, but it also redefined the relationship between businesses and the neighborhoods they inhabited. This shift led to a transformation of major metro areas, turning a sea of cold skyscrapers into warm, mixed-use 20-minute neighborhoods, and at the heart of these neighborhoods were "banyans".

"The Banyan" Commercial: [04:49] Welcome to the Banyan. Like the far-reaching branches of a banyan tree, we bring everything together in one place. We're redefining what it means to work with lifestyle amenities that are customized to you and what you value. Focus in on our coworking lounges that are optimized for your personal productivity. Grab a bite with friends at our biodynamic and fully traceable eatery. Check out our immersive maker labs that support your lifelong learning journey. Recharge in our wellness pods with unlimited access to "HealthMind AI" where compassionate health coaches are standing by. The Banyan isn't just a place, it's a vision. Say goodbye to the traditional 9-5 and come experience a seamless ecosystem where work is anywhere you want it to be. The Banyan, where the community thrives, possibilities unfold, and the extraordinary becomes the everyday. The Banyan will reserve the right to collect and process user data upon entry, including, but not limited to, location, demographics, biometric purchase history, and behavioral terms and conditions may apply. Discover the future. Experience the Banyan.

Kaelynn Reid: [06:13] The way work was being done continued to shift. Instead of being tethered to keyboards, people could just speak instructions to their AI work assistant to complete and automate tasks. This meant that employees could technically work from anywhere, making Banyans a place people wanted to be because of the unique services and amenities that it offered. But companies began pushing back on the Banyan concept, saying things like listen, we just can't sacrifice our company culture. Sharing space dilutes our unique message and identity. Employees have like five jobs as it is, and they need a place where they can connect to our values. IIDA's 2026 survey on distributed belonging laid the groundwork for the role of designer to be a translator of culture in both physical and digital spaces. It found the sense of belonging wasn't limited to the physical environment alone, but could be bolstered by both virtual and augmented experiences. Design firms started offering new services that included curating the digital experience and crafting the immersive encounter. Rather than avoiding the digital frontier, designers embraced it. They reimagined the shared spaces within the Banyan, creating environments known as heritage spaces that could adapt to the unique cultural identities of businesses utilizing them. These spaces leveraged things like augmented reality, holographic displays, and interactive sensory elements that allowed employees to connect to their company's heritage and culture, even in a shared environment. These spaces became critical to quickly onboarding both new hires and temporary gig workers.

By 2028, designers were leveraging data collected by the banyans to create hyper-personalized experiences for employees like never before. For instance, data collected from patterns of movement, task duration and preferred work settings could adjust things like lighting and temperature, and even audio enhancements that could support productive and unproductive moments. Managers could reserve areas in the banyan that were equipped with large format screens and spatial audio to transform huddle rooms into a beach oasis. Annual reviews in Hawaii kind of became a thing. Embedded sensors and ancillary seating could alert users of burnout symptoms like fatigue, automatically sending messages to their managers to push deadlines out. While data was unlocking the doors to user insights that could create responsive environments, it was also becoming increasingly recognized as a form of currency. With

users' consent, banyans could leverage data to enhance not just design solutions but business solutions. In return for highly valued things like health and behavioral data, some companies began rolling out possibility perks as part of their compensation packages.

"Possibility Perks" Commercial: [09:24] With Possibility Perks, create a lifestyle that resonates with your interests and values. Follow your passion for environmentalism, arts and culture, adventure and discovery, or forge your own unique path. Gone are the days of one-size-fits-all benefits. As a subscriber, you have the flexibility to customize your package based on your evolving life stage. Require more wellness supports during busy periods? No problem. Looking to engage in continuous learning as your career advances? We've got you covered. Your subscription actively adapts to life's changes, with automatic recommendations. Planning to start a family, parental leave and backup daycare are just the touch of a button away. Want to transition to a more nomadic lifestyle? Your perks will suggest portability upgrades to maintain well-being no matter where you roam. With Possibility Perks, you're in the driver's seat of a lifestyle that levels up in lockstep with your growth. Experience, work on your terms, all while flourishing as the multi-faceted human you are. That's the gift of possibility, and it's yours for the taking. Possibility Perks.

Kaelynn Reid: [10:50] For the 52% of the workforce that included Gen Z and Millennials, life was about access over ownership, making these possibility perks something that naturally complemented the flexible way people wanted work to integrate into their lives. For employers, they organized employees across banyans and they drove engagement and retention and recruitment in an increasingly distributed workforce. And for employees, it allowed them to realize more fulfilled lives. Possibility Perks Furniture became a vital way that companies harness data in the banyans, but needs were constantly changing. Massive tech upgrades in furniture happened about as frequently as new iPhone releases, making the one-time purchase model of furniture outdated. Companies demanded a new furniture lifecycle that could be changed out more frequently. Enter furniture as a service. Manufacturers leveraged new materials that could essentially ship flat and expand on site when certain environmental conditions were met. By 2029, commercial furniture could basically build itself, and when companies were done with it, local dealers could reclaim those products and either rotate them between companies or have them broken down into their raw materials and recycled in the warehouse. Circular models like this encouraged renewal, redistribution, and responsible material flows, rather than the linear take-make-waste mentality. The company was able to create a new product.

People became more and more concerned about data privacy and how it was being monetized by companies. To combat the sharing of data to undisclosed third parties and the frequent breaches, designers started to champion privacy and security guidelines. Working with manufacturers, they created universal product tags in the blockchain that disclosed exactly what types of data certain products could collect. Many industry professionals teamed up with data ethics experts to integrate guidelines directly into the design of the banyans. As a result of these ongoing data conflicts, designers would often create tech-free sanctuaries within the banyan for users seeking digital solitude. In the inspiring landscape of 2030, work seamlessly integrates into the larger canvas of our lives. Boundaries vanish as diverse individuals, from portfolio career professionals to traditional employees and community members, are drawn to places like the banyan. Here, accessibility, values-aligned amenities, and the profound impact of genuine in-person connections drive a collective pursuit of meaningful experiences. The responsive built environment effortlessly transitions between diverse use cases, effortlessly transforming from a blood draw lab to a microbrewery within just a few hours, which blurs the lines between industry sectors and their unique spatial needs. Guided by data insights, design enhancements foster heightened concentration, boundless creativity, and an unprecedented sense of purpose. Furniture is no longer this

passive element of interiors but is instead an active player in shaping people's daily lives. The concept of sitting has completely been reimagined into an activity that can collect human-centric data, harness energy or even generate income. You heard that right? Chair networks distributed across banyans now serve as these micro power plants, generating crazy amounts of energy through piezoelectric gardens. Furniture manufacturers have released chairs, sofas, and other ancillary products synced to smart grids that feed surplus power back for carbon credits or for money. Manufacturers can earn supplementary income that averages $250 to $1,000 monthly depending on usage. Employees at companies offering Possibility Perk plans are now able to earn this supplemental income through energy credit reimbursement programs. Popularizing the term "sitting is the new side hustle". Designers have now transcended their roles, evolving into placemakers who advocate for progress in harmony with ethics, developing environments that extend way beyond the confines of four walls. They continue to champion adaptable design solutions that can evolve to meet the changing demands, with a focus on curating holistic experiences in both physical and digital environments, with passions and skills choreographed via data. The future of work is here. It's one of distributed belonging, spatial convergence, and benefits. Autonomy, a culture valuing you, empowered by technology designed for you. This past spring, Kimball International held its first inaugural Future X event, where we invited a cohort of designers ranging in experience, discipline, and location to join us in Detroit for a foresight workshop on the future of belonging and design. One of the questions we asked each designer was what are you most excited or concerned about regarding the future?

Sean Pantin: [17:09] What excites me is the fact that people are looking more towards mental health, developing spaces that are promoting mental health and, since I work in K-12, students' well-being. What's concerning me right now is the high stress of creating spaces that are secure, so things are starting to look a little bit more closed off instead of open, and that kind of concerns me. My name is Sean Pantin, I work for PBK Architects, I am a Design Principal and you're listening to the Alternative Design podcast.

Kaelynn Reid: [17:49] So now the fun part... What does it all mean? I've whittled this giantly dense forecast into five main takeaways for designers. The first is the lines will be blurred. Right now, we don't often consider durability and beauty as synonyms. There's a reason why we have specific furniture solutions that cater to different sectors, but I think this will change. Just like we've seen hospitality influence other industries, I think this will continue to evolve into even more non-sector specific solutions. Material innovations will make it so that you can in fact specify mohair on a clinical chair. The more we see AI discover never-before-seen materials, the faster I think this will become a reality. But the blurring isn't only happening around furniture features, but around applications as well. Space types will have to do double, sometimes triple, duty. Culture Cafés will turn into Work Your Ways. That will then become Well and Good areas. Designers just won't be capped by industry standards but will instead have new affordances to shape places that use data insights to support humans, whether they're students, nurses, or admin staff. So, what does that mean for designers today? Expand your expertise across sectors like healthcare, education, hospitality, and more, to inform multi-use design. Employ universal design principles that are going to allow adaptability across users, and then collaborate with manufacturers to specify modular components that are going to continue to enable flexible solutions, and then potentially use pilot projects, maybe even digitally, to demonstrate these potential multi-use concepts and build client confidence.

The second takeaway is that placemakers will shape both physical and digital experiences. Designers will be called upon more and more to curate immersive brand experiences that will leverage things like interactive elements and technology in order to translate company culture. We could see designers upskill to gain knowledge in things like environmental graphics, augmented reality and even gaming design, and

act as consultants in this digital frontier. Rather than shy away from the digital environment and fear that it's the enemy, let's embrace it as a built environment enhancer that can add value and accessibility for users. Take advantage of the season where noncyclical work is on the slower side, and begin diversifying skills and services.

The third takeaway is that data will be hyper-personalized and human-centric. Sensors will intersect with things like lighting and temperature controls and even color changing materials, and just so much more. Users will have more control than ever to customize their experience in the built environment, and designers are going to give them the switchboard. But while things like biometric health data alludes to this really promising future where you can just sit in a chair and have it alert you for signs of stress. All of that has a back-of-house reality. The way we obtain, store, and use the massive amounts of data that will be collected from smart environments and products is going to need to be addressed. Designers will need to become advocates for ethical data practices, and that starts with demanding transparency. Ask questions like what type of data is this collecting? How can we use the minimal amount of data for the biggest outcome? We need to educate ourselves and our clients on responsible data collection practices and design features that will prioritize consent, security, and privacy.

The fourth takeaway is that furniture will not be passive. Now, admittedly, it may not generate income, who knows...but the point of the scenario is to propose that furniture will be actively shaping human outcomes in the future. Whether it be with embedded sensors, kinetic energy harvesting or ambient cooling technologies, furniture is going to do something in the built environment. Designers can start to identify products that create active solutions that support holistic health, productivity, and enrichment, and really guide their clients to make selections based on impacts. How might a table or a chair contribute insights or experiences that will align to business goals?

The fifth and final takeaway is design as a service. I believe furniture is going to feel like an iPhone release, where people want to opt in for the latest and greatest version early, and often products won't be specified to last 10 or more years before discussing replacement. But more and more we're going to see clients asking for more circular service models. That's going to give them more flexibility, more choice, and more solutions. Again, it's about access over ownership. Over 50% of consumers lease their iPhones because it gives them an affordable way to experience what they want. We may see designers needing to guide clients through a decision-making framework that determines ideal ownership versus usership models. They could propose pilots of furniture take back programs, redeployment services or even things like joint inventory sharing on client projects to demonstrate circular benefits and gather intel on what works and what doesn't. And, who knows, maybe we'll see designers suggesting furniture subscription plans for clients who want to keep up with tech, have access to new furniture applications, and want it all bundled into a reoccurring payment. What this could mean for both designers and furniture manufacturers is a roster of long-term clients you serve over and over again.

As we look to the future, there's tremendous potential for the design profession to shape more uplifting and human-centered work experiences. While ongoing tech and social changes may disrupt norms at our core, people will always yearn for meaning, belonging, and environments that elevate well-being. By embracing emerging realms like digital placemaking, yet staying grounded in timeless human needs, developers have an opportunity to guide a future vision with care and conscience, one where work integrates seamlessly into the tapestry of life, empowered by insights that create bespoke places allowing everyone to thrive. There are uncharted frontiers calling designers to step up and shepherding positive change and, if we lean into upskilling, creative confidence and ethical innovation, there's a brighter future ahead, one rich in fulfillment, connections and the assurance of spaces that will be designed just for you.

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The power to shape this future is in the hands of forward-thinking designers who are going to continue to explore the margins of change and anticipate what's coming for the future of work. That's it for this episode. Thank you to Senior Foresight Manager Mark Bryan at Future Today Institute for helping us learn and adapt their signal collection, trend development and scenario frameworks that helped us put this scenario together. The show was produced by myself and Andrew Reid, audio production and scoring also done by Andrew Reid, voice acting done by Jessica Gubbins, Lauren Goode and Todd Barsness. Alternative Design podcast is brought to you by Kimball International. Thanks for listening and we'll be back in February for our next season.